

PERIPATHETIC

Notes on (un)belonging



CHER TAN

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CHER TAN was born in Singapore in 1987 and moved to unceded Kaurna land (so-called 'Adelaide') in 2012. She learned how to write through making zines and blogging. Her essays, criticism and other written work have been published widely. She is the reviews editor at *Meanjin* and an editor at *Liminal*, and currently lives and works on unceded Wurundjeri land. *Peripathetic* is her first book.



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‘What do I think, what do I think about now?
I want to think very well. I want to say what
I say now. I diverge. I digress and diverge now.
I go sideways. But I’m not linear. Is this the
way to write my essay now?’

ANIA WALWICZ

‘Its torqued seriality – bent, twisted, propelled off line –
is occult, impossible articulation.’

FRED MOTEN



IS THIS REAL?

When the neologism ‘meatspace’ was first put to use, the distinction between ‘real life’ and ‘virtual reality’ was stark. The term served as an antithesis to ‘cyberspace’, a realm where people typed to each other as they got increasingly hornier, and you needn’t make a concerted effort to pretend to be someone else there. At the time it didn’t seem like those arenas could be bridged, in a world where you could, easily, be one person in one space and another persona in the other. I tried to be a 65-year-old man on Omegle once, just to confuse those who thought I was going to launch into a sex chat. For many years in the early 2000s I followed the musings of an online edgelord simply known as ‘Maddox’ without knowing anything more about them than what they’d chosen to present on their blog. It wasn’t until the late 2010s that his street identity was revealed – you know, the one most people use to file their taxes, open a bank account, register a passport to travel beyond the borders

of the birth country, et cetera. Exposed! But that boolean mindset is no longer in the foreground. You can now be anyone and anything and yet still be yourself. IRL feeds into URL into IRL and over and over again. A GIF of a snake eating its own tail.

The web was built with fantasy in mind. It was always meant to be about things just out of reach, a self that we could not pursue in the luminescent distracting glow of daylight. Renditions of things that were already in the world, made better, faster, more convenient, used and operated on without so much as a thought. That cliché mental image of cogs and labourers all within a large rhizome working the entire business from beneath except made material – neon tubing bordering 336 television sets, each screen blaring in unison an unrelenting assemblage of images both familiar and foreign, so familiar they become foreign, and until incongruity is imbued with an intimacy. This is a real life art work; look it up. See what I mean. From Usenet to mIRC to Neopets to Friendster to MySpace. And then we made it real, even if the fantastical corners continue to thrive. It hinges on a kind of aspiration, where one is guided by the possibility of a future that is yet to happen, its peculiar novelty both a promise and a threat: we might be able to get there if we yeeted ourselves far enough into the abyss. I could make a damning allegation against my friend on Instagram and they might be ostracised forever. Or at least until people forget. I would take therapeutic or prescription drug advice from strangers on message boards and it would improve the shape of my life. People swipe over each other on a dating app and next thing you know they're parents to a child birthed of their loins. A rideshare driver needs to look at their phone pretty much all day so they can make enough money to earn a living. Buy one bitcoin for shits and giggles in 2014 and you could wake up to an amazing morning

three years later. Even then, very few had any inkling its value would multiply nearly fourfold by late 2021. Let us look at the price chart now.

When the Somerton Man wrote ‘tamam shud’ on a scrap of paper and put it in his pocket before he presumably walked into the water in the late 1940s, he wouldn’t have known his legacy would precede him, an anonymous figure posthumously made famous, a ‘weird and wonderful’ delight that’s become an amusing curiosity online. In the decades since, many more theories have been developed, which, as writer Aimee Knight noted, has become an instance where ‘the public has just taken ownership of the case and so many individuals have taken it wherever their own narrative points or wherever they feel the puzzle pieces fit’. Who’s to say what’s real? The Somerton Man isn’t alive to tell us, so we rely on projection instead. I asked Knight again, five years after a joint investigation with a forensic scientist into the man’s identity that was later claimed to be solved. Her response: ‘The mystery is always more interesting than the matter, but maybe now the man can get some peace and quiet’.

Attempts at exposure have usually gone awry. Before the Boston marathon bombers were identified as the Tsarnaev brothers, a large group of people described as ‘self-deputised internet detectives’ focused undue attention on innocent others on the scene, leading to newspaper exposés that continued to perpetuate the untruth, endangering the lives of those singled out as accusations flew. Charli D’Amelio is now worth \$30 million. What did she do? A number of TikTok videos, which oils the same machine we’re all on. Then it went red-hot. The human individual equivalent of an IPO. You might insist that the two worlds have to be made absolutely separate and never the twain shall meet, yet it would be a dazzling mind trick if one were to

refute this ‘extended, loaded evidence’, as Susan Sontag once wrote of the photograph. A real imaginary pervades.

What of it? How are personas made? We can think of catfishers, Twitch streamers, artists, politicians, influencers, governments and celebrities with a public relations team so savvy their online content serves to deflect malignancies like a fresh coat of paint. Then there are the meme accounts, those who seek freedom away from the gazes of others while still allowing for visibility, without the threat of surveillance and context collapse looming ahead. Yet some may find it irresistible to reveal themselves post-virality. It’s me, suckers! Me! I was responsible for this brilliance! Post your most recent saved photo (that reflects who you are), no cheating. Post your background wallpaper, no cheating. Post your most-listened to songs, no cheating.

For more clues to help explain away the unrealness of our current reality, we can cast our glances towards the past. After all, what happens online can only be manifested via a critical mass, and corporations, through marketing or otherwise, have always been keenly attuned to the many human foibles that can be manipulated through psychology. Sex sells. Disaster attracts. Capital accrues. The internet is merely late capitalism’s beloved envoy; an auxiliary amplifier writ large. It might go without saying, then, that the crafting of personas has almost always been a stand-in for both shame and clownery – it is this inherent ambiguity that keeps everyone, the actor included, on their toes. Shame, as per (Sigmund) Freud, a site of trauma. Clownery, as per (Henri) Bergson, a response to discrepancy. What will happen next? Let the story unfold. At this we might look to tricksters like W.G. Sebald – the late, great writer and chronicler

of memory. The stories build up: he told friends that his debut novel had been accepted for publication even though it hadn't; he later asserted having six first names, revising his earlier claim of only three, although this too was proven false. In the mid 1960s, not long after his move to Manchester, he became known as 'Max' – short for 'Maximilian' – which he claimed was his third legal name even though it was one he had chosen himself. Another instance of Sebald's penchant for embellishment was seen in his inclusion of excerpts from letters supposedly penned by the philosopher Theodor Adorno, even though there was only one such letter. These are only three examples in a litany of (known) untruths with which Sebald had famously regaled those around him.

There was also the case of his breakthrough novel, *The Emigrants*, where it eventually came to light that he had repurposed stories from his friends without obtaining their consent or blessing. It was perhaps Sebald's way of reaching towards that 'reality effect' first analysed by Roland Barthes, a technique that allows readers to immerse themselves in the depicted reality without being overly conscious that they are reading. In *Speak, Silence*, Carole Angier's riveting biography about Sebald, I was treated to the revelation that the novel featured an entire page lifted from the journal of a woman named Thea Gebhardt, who happened to be the aunt of Sebald's friend Peter Jordan – even though Sebald had been entrusted with her journal, he had not received permission to use its contents without acknowledging her as its source. In his final novel, *Austerlitz*, published in 2001 just a month before his untimely death, Sebald again appropriated someone else's experiences, this time Susi Bechhöfer's during the Kindertransport, an organised rescue effort of children in Nazi-occupied areas in the late 1930s. He'd drawn from her accounts as documented

in her book *Rosa's Child* and a BBC documentary he'd seen. This act led her to publish an objection: 'Stripped of My Tragic Past by a Bestselling Author'. Even then, according to Angier, 'no acknowledgement ever appeared'.

There is undoubtedly something Sebald does with abstracted notions such as 'truth' and 'memory' that then tells us something a little bit more gnarly about personhood, yet leaves enough omissions for us to continue unknitting our own. Autofiction often involves a reconfiguration of biographical facts – and in some cases, linear time – to get to a kernel of (emotional) 'truth', a suitably relevant genre for our times. Without a singular definition, it's not the opposite of fiction, nor the apposite of nonfiction, but an 'oxymoronic genre', as described by Isabelle Grell in the introduction to a scholarly publication entitled (you guessed it) *l'Autofiction*. As a form of autobiographical writing that experiments with the definitions and limits of the self – as opposed to a tired regurgitation of known facts – the genre prods at the spaces between truth and imagination as an attempt to show that 'reality' is subjectively constructed. Memories change, contradictions abound; we are the unreliable narrators of our own lives. Meanwhile, disinformation stands alongside honest satire and reported news later exposed as completely false or inconclusive, 'the real' nestled inside a hyper-reality that seeks to upend previously held beliefs – what Rivka Galchen once described as a 'fanciful castle of facts'. Legit!

You might think, perhaps the internet was the real autofiction all along, and you might not be too far from the truth. Not unlike the internet, the rise of the novel as the predominant literary mode coincided with the growth of capitalism and its expansionist pursuits. In England, the form's beginnings were closely tied to deceit, trickery and business-minded opportunism – a sort of narrative-confidence scam,

if you will. One stellar example is serial hustler Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*, which was initially marketed as a true story, and closely based on the real-life experiences of castaway Alexander Selkirk. Although not exactly a Potemkin village, we see shades of its structure: a veneer laid over what's already there, constructed primarily to either strike awe or give off a sense of normalcy, but ultimately belying a certain way of life. When Grigory Potemkin constructed his villages in seventeenth century New Russia to impress his ruler and lover Catherine the Great, he populated the towns with men dressed as peasants, and as soon as Catherine and her entourage had seen it, labourers quickly moved to resimulate the model villages upstream.

This is not a true story, or at least one that is historically verifiable, but we now see many Potemkin villages in our midst: the Turkmen model village of Bereketli Zaman, which was left abandoned not long after its official opening; Carson City, in the town of Vårgårda in western Sweden, built to resemble Harlem, New York, as a test track for self-driving cars; Tiefert and Junction City, near the Fort Irwin army base in the Mojave Desert, template cities used solely by the US military to simulate warring in (presumably) Iraq and Syria; the 'Peace Village' in North Korea near the DMZ. You get my drift. In 2013, the Russian town of Suzdal saw shabby wooden houses draped in banners, camouflaged to look as if their facades were better tended than they were, with carved window frames and flower pots on window sills – Vladimir Putin was about to come through the town for a national conference of local government officials. And in what could be the Potemkin village personified, Donald Trump's ghostwriter recounts, 'What the bulldozers and dump trucks did wasn't important [...] so long as they did a lot of it'. The orange-tinged media personality-turned-conservative populist had hoped to convince a hotel mega-chain to partner

with him in the construction of a casino, but all he had was a vacant lot. The illusion of scale is the spin itself.

The things we rely upon to construct our individual identities and lifestyles have already constructed us – that’s why they are ready at hand. In *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, Byung-Chul Han writes that ‘the original is something imaginary’. Not unlike the fictional boundaries of nationality, of race, of gender. This is not to say that other people’s interpretations based on the above classifiers don’t apply, or don’t affect us in perverse ways. But to pinpoint an origin story would be to construct a terrible truth, in which may lay a fantastic lie. I was once at a ramen museum in Yokohama, Japan, where the interior was designed to appear as if we were in Shōwa-era Tokyo, the atmosphere akin to a period movie set. Swept up in this atmosphere, I looked up and imagined men with long hair in flowy robes swishing above me, caught in a fighting dance. I bought little souvenirs of retro Japanese candy I had never been acquainted with and therefore had no memories of, and ate German-inspired ramen made from durum wheat. Authenticity? To hell with it! Yet the museum seemed to be revelling in authenticity’s death throes even if it was grasping on to it for dear life.

If something is repeated often enough, then it crystallises itself as truth in the cultural consciousness. This is reality; reality is real. A third into the 1994 movie *In the Mouth of Madness*, Sam Neill’s character, John Trent, talks to a bestselling author who convinces him that the stories in his book are real because he’s sold one billion copies. ‘More than the Bible!’ the author sneers. It took me a long time to unlearn and discard the mythic images that the old country was trying to sell to me

about itself. I'm sure there are still residual traces. See how I dare not invoke its name. There was the truth. And then there was the truth. Could it be that the most Sebaldian of thinkers are the ones who understand exile? It needn't matter if the exile is voluntary or forced, psychic or physical – the fact that there is movement means arriving at another reality, and as such what might make this destabilisation a little gentler turns into a binary choice: to either abide by or develop an offence against the new real. Often we oscillate between the two; maybe only the strongest and craziest of minds can withstand irreconciliation. But most flip flop. I think about Amitava Kumar's protagonist Kailash from his novel *Immigrant, Montana*, the most Sebaldian book I've read that was published post-2000. As with Sebald's insertion of Vladimir Nabokov, who appears once every four sections in *The Emigrants*, this recurring figure for Kumar is the late cultural critic and exiled intellectual Edward W. Said. Unlike the former, however, Said never directly appears in the novel itself, but is often alluded to as a close friend of a character named Ehsaan Ali, Kailash's lecturer. Yet Ali wasn't completely a figment of Kumar's imagination, either: he is based on Said's comrade in life, the writer and political scientist Eqbal Ahmad. *Immigrant, Montana* reads like a joyous fantasy, a migrant's hope, particularly as Kailash spends his time discovering other cultures through his classmates and goes to raucous dinner parties at Ehsaan's house where they discuss politics and philosophy. The usual tropes – of feeling like an outsider in a new home, the sense of struggle that comes with rebuilding a new life, the dislocation that inevitably arises as we try to reconcile both our 'old' and 'new' selves – never feature. We know that's the reality, so why bother bringing it to life again in fiction? In this way it is imbued with a sense of futurism, because in entertaining other realities besides the one

we are confronted with we gain the ability to think about what could *be*.

Like Kailash, I've also frequently felt that 'immigration was the original sin', that 'someone owed me something'. Identity politicians may call this entitlement, but it could equally be construed as a sense of having being cheated. While migration can be liberating – and it has been for me, at least in terms of reclaiming the psycho-political un-freedoms I had been burdened with in the old country – it can simultaneously be a failed promise. People about to migrate, particularly those who don't do so explicitly for work, usually do not stop to consider the losses that will arise; we are in the midst of escaping. Everything else can come later, and it may involve a reconstitution of priorities that results in this feeling of having been ripped off. A betrayal. I didn't ask for this! Yet subconsciously I did. And I *could*, survivor's guilt included. As with Kailash, this sentiment had 'provided me with an exaggerated sense of identity', giving me 'permission to do anything I wanted'. Like many other migrants, I have been polishing a slate built around memories of past selves.

This is all true. None of this is true. People are storytellers. Seems like a no-brainer. I can recall the times I'd show up at focus groups, after being approved to participate for giving the correct answers to several preliminary questions. I kept up the pretense by memorising a script: I like drinking Big M strawberry milk, not Nippy's or Dare or Oak. I'm an office administrator and I take public transport six times a day. I'm about to buy a house, maybe a two-storey duplex. I go to the gym regularly. I'm thinking of having a child. You have to build a character around it, then the rest comes easy. The other people there could have been doing the same schtick as well. But the truth is that we were all authentic in those thirty minutes because we were going

to go away with a couple hundred bucks in cash. Other times we were asked to share our consumer narratives in exchange for a voucher, for the purposes of more consumerism at the supermarket. Thanks! I needed that, actually.

Think about how we each perform at work, in order to fulfil a role that ends up benefiting our quality of life. Or the ways in which performances materialise each time a new interaction occurs. Each performance assembles a specific character in the tunnels of your mind, driven by unconscious desires and repulsions. But the performance is the point, a piece in a puzzle that makes up something real. Photorealism personified. What did Lionel Trilling say? ‘The idea that somewhere under all the roles there is Me, that poor old ultimate actuality, who, when all the roles have been played, would like to murmur “Off, off, you lendings!” and settle down with his own original actual self.’ I am me when I’m not me, and not me when I’m me. That’s the truth.

You may want to call the current reality a ‘hyper-reality’, but even that doesn’t quite get us there. In the 1976 text *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard defined the hyper-real as a societal condition where simulacra trumps ideology. Citing ‘nature’ and ‘naturalness’ as an example, he saw it as an annoying malaise, and which the market law of value appropriates to render systems of reference imaginary – ‘a phantom reference, a puppet reference, a simulated reference’. He expanded on the concept four years later, noting in *Simulacra and Simulation* that a hyper-reality is one that mimics cloning, where copies exist without their origins in sight; ‘models of a real without reality’. The cultural theorist brings up *An American Family* –

widely considered the first reality TV show in history – as replete with hyper-realistic qualities, a cinema vérité experience that he described as ‘a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, [...] of simultaneous distancing and magnification, of distortion of scale, of an excessive transparency’. A precursor to the now-prevalent ‘day in the life’, the show featured seven members (complete with dogs) of a Californian upper-middle-class white family as a camera crew filmed them going about their quotidian lives for seven months in the early 1970s. During the twelve-episode run, Mum asks Dad to move out while their eldest son comes out as gay. It is, as the latter once said following the show’s popularity, ‘the middle-class dream that you can become famous for being just who you are’. This fame would trail him all the way until his death in 2001, which was broadcast as *A Death in an American Family*, billed at his request as a ‘final episode’ of sorts. His mum, who was initially agreeable and enthusiastic about the experience, went on the record not long after *An American Family* had aired to say that the director had made them look ‘like a bunch of freaks and monsters’. Decades later, a film was made about the making of the show, and the director of the original show never made another like it in its aftermath. Here it didn’t matter what was considered reality; audiences were eager to lap it up nonetheless, to be able to scrutinise how other people live, react, behave.

Since then there have been hundreds more of these shows around the world, with new and more alluring formats each time, some verging on the point of ridiculousness, a parody of itself. Throw a bunch of strangers together in a remote tropical location and see what happens as they form teams and fight for rewards amid high interpersonal drama! Throw a bunch of strangers in a specially constructed villa that’s under surveillance at all times and see how they go about living together without access to the

outside world! If a contestant decides they need access to a doctor or psychological services, those are ready at hand. What about a series that puts two complete strangers together as they strive towards marital coupledness? Or we can follow a dozen women as they vie for a man's heart. The winner receives a lovely rose. While audiences today are generally clued in to the mechanisms that sustain the reality TV industry, with most if not all being fully aware of the nature of the media they're consuming and choosing to watch these shows with relative scepticism and even a schadenfreude-driven glee, a similar fascination remains. How dare she do that cuntish thing! Could he possibly win? He's such a great outdoorsman, and really charismatic too. I wouldn't do that if presented with the same situation; I can't believe they're that stupid. Whoa shit I sure didn't expect her to make *that* decision. He's so annoying I wish he'd just get kicked off. Who'd have thought he'd harbour that dumb opinion? It's delightful to have the ability to possess a god's-eye view over the narrative, cast the vote.

This is one way of conducting what David Foster Wallace considers 'predatory human research', as he describes it in his 1993 essay 'E Unibus Pluram'. Of course, he was referring to television then – this was during a time when the medium had taken a postmodern turn, its programming (at least in the many anglophone cultures that respond to and thus uphold North American hegemony) gradually rife with qualities such as irony, reflexivity and self-referentiality; a pre-empted knowingness, if you like. We're all in on the gag. We're self-aware enough to reckon with multiple cognitive dissonances. If we can agree that a medium's knowingness extends to an audience who are not in the dark about the manipulated reality they're consuming, then it's not at all a stretch to say that social media is currently working in tandem with mass media to achieve an aggregated

hyper-real. Where reality TV was once the distant mirror, social media is the Do-It-Yourself equivalent. A day in the life of me? Let's fucking go (viral).

In this sense, an updated definition of Guy Debord's theory of the 'spectacle' might be more useful. In his 1967 text *Society of the Spectacle*, an addendum to the Situationist movement he helped build, he defined it as 'capital accumulated to the point it becomes image'. But the Marxist philosopher himself continued to refine this thinking 21 years after the above was published, six years before his death by suicide; in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord acknowledged that the two spectacles he had previously noted – one concentrated, the other diffuse – had merged. The former is characterised by the glorification of political figures through cults of personality (Mao, Stalin, Hoxha, Lee, et al.), while the latter features a kind of commodified thinking that places aesthetics front and centre ('what appears is good; what is good appears'). A quarter of a century later, McKenzie Wark in *The Spectacle of Disintegration* pushed the concept further, particularly as Debord's observations continued to accelerate in the real world. Referring to the integrated spectacle as she cast her gaze towards the adjacent poles of labour and desire, Wark observes: 'In the separation between labour and desire lie the origins of the spectacle, which appears as the world of all that can be desired, or rather, of all the appropriate modes of desiring'.

Another decade has passed since then. Can the truth be found inside the spectacle? Or can the spectacle be found inside the truth? What can we make, for example, of Australian businessman Craig Wright's claim of being the mysterious bitcoin founder Satoshi Nakamoto, and then going so far as to sue for libel an anonymous Twitter account with a cat astronaut avatar? The real Nakamoto appears to be still be at

large, whoever they may be. Within this context the basis of reality remains perpetually open to reinterpretation. A truer term might be ‘psyop realism’, particularly as more people in the world are becoming aware that we are living in a time when sources previously taken for granted as trustworthy, such as government and the media, are showing their cracks; in a time when it is tricky to ascertain if something is an advertisement. If propaganda can now be produced via artificial intelligence, then it’s not far-fetched to say that we are living in wartime, except that what we are experiencing is a psychological war. In this war the walls are invisible until you come up against them. You find yourself unable to move forward, yet baffled at your understanding of a reality that doesn’t quite seem to match up with what’s happening then and there. Parody, fact, exaggeration, delusion and fantasy come together in a spectacular headlong collision, and this is not taking into account what other people consider their realities. In a 2023 trend report, the advertising agency Think Forward observed:

Our cultural understanding of what’s ‘authentic’ has spanned the whole spectrum: from peak performativity to performative vulnerability, from full-throttle FaceTune to #nomakeup selfies. Having been through it all, there’s a sense that none of it feels real anymore. Now, to combat the sense that any form of self-presentation is disingenuous, authenticity has become a game of chicken: people are pushing further into the margins to separate those who are performing from those who truly believe. [...] Deeply weird or chaotic energy is relatable, from the cult of Julia Fox, to mass identification with Goblin Mode, to the nearly four million views on ‘gross girl’ TikToks.

What if people are so desperate to capture the smallest kernel of authenticity that we are beginning to collapse the public and private? In an increasingly atomised world where the once-juvenile ‘trust no one’ turns into a reluctant maxim, it’s almost too easy for suspicion to take hold. Is this real? Nah, totally fake. Is this photo generated by AI? Can we fact-check this novel? How much work has this person done to their face? How historically accurate is the TV series *The Crown*? Is this artist as poor as they say they are? Am I actually Chinese if I don’t give a shit about Lunar New Year? Has that guy wearing the Extortion cap even listened to what the band has put out? If these \$30 ‘dupe’ leggings look like the Lululemon ones and if this \$11 ‘dupe’ face wash has qualities like the La Mer ones, then I can hardly be the one to judge – they work at duping me into believing that I’m wearing leggings from Lululemon and washing my face with La Mer. If I were to perform certain behaviours then I may be considered more authentic. One can aspire to be more authentic with every iteration of themselves.

If something is repeated often enough, then it crystallises itself as truth in the cultural consciousness. The pursuit of authenticity can be considered ‘cruel optimism’, a postmodern feeling the late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant explores in their book of the same name. If authenticity is simultaneously unattainable and right there, striving towards it counts as a kind of masquerade, which Berlant defines as a ‘compromised position of possibility’ where its realisation is eventually found to be ‘impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic’. Authenticity is the feels when irony is made sincere.

In Amalia Ulman's *El Planeta*, the artist and director casts her own mother Ale, who is neither an artist nor an actor, into the story. The film depicts a hustler mother–daughter duo who, as they struggle to make ends meet, indulge in delusions of grandeur. The end result is a tragedy. Here, the close dynamic evinced between Ulman and her mother is clear, yet the story itself is not true to their lives. When Ulman's character, Leo, meets up with other people, she makes fantastical statements about herself that sound as if she is lying, but which the audience later finds out are actually true. In an interview with *Vulture*, Ulman tells the reporter that she gives star ratings to high-end bottled waters on her Instagram stories. It's both a tongue-in-cheek dig at the ever-expanding absurdities of consumer culture and a serious interest of hers. She goes on to say that she plans on studying to become a water sommelier. It is difficult to discern what the performance is. 'Nothing is work and nothing is life,' Ulman explains. 'It's all just all the same.'

If authenticity is a social relation, then we can say that we are more authentic to others the closer we reach its ideal, one that is mostly attained through others' perceptions. Populism, after all, is fuelled through public representations of the real. What is determined to be 'fake' or 'false' becomes a yardstick through which traits such as personality, charisma or intelligence hinge on. Reminds me of a role-playing game. Can something be considered a lie if there is popular consensus that then bolsters belief? Stories such as Ulman's, or Sebald's, could not possibly have been worthy of examination or interest if authenticity was not a desirous goal. Not of theirs, but of others.

We can also look to Gary Vaynerchuk, who, off a combination of savvy, loquaciousness and charisma, has managed to build a net worth of \$200 million. An early observer of the

parasocial impulse that has only accelerated through online mediums now, Vaynerchuk began building his personal brand through his dad's business, a wine retailer, which led him to host a wildly popular YouTube channel. There, he began providing wine reviews, including tips on how to appreciate wine. Now a self-described 'serial entrepreneur' who posts videos of himself sharing tips on how to succeed at business, fans often describe him as 'authentic' due to how his videos never seem overly edited. His predilection for swear words is perceived as refreshing. It is 'uncensored', so to speak, not unlike some TikToks and the many 'unfiltered' videos that depict aspects of urban and rural life. Here I am, no filter, speaking at my phone, camera view front-facing. I'm right here, right now, as real as I can be; like the photograph, they are, in Sontag's words, 'imprisoning reality'. Young people were sounding off about their grandparents falling for scams orchestrated through phone calls and text messages, of their parents believing 'anything they read on Facebook', but the cycle only repeats itself through recuperated forms. If you can believe it, there's an actual way to survive a plane crash. If you can't convince me of your persona, then you're not real to me.

When there is a proliferation of misinformation, reality destabilisation occurs. After all, they did call it 'gaslighting' – to pinpoint an origin story would be to construct a terrible truth, in which may lay a fantastic lie. And I can in fact speak from experience, having spent my most formative years living under an illiberal democracy where you – that is, if one chooses to do so – frequently have to learn how to disentangle the many layers of propaganda, a Jenga tower primed to fall at any minute, and where the discovery of a particular truth leads not necessarily to liberation but to complete and utter despair. We can see this most explicitly in 'hasbara', used as part of the Israeli

ethnostate's public relations efforts to explain away its crimes against the Palestinian people, alongside attempts to traffic in widespread fabrications that control and distort fact in order to advance its own preferred narratives. Paranoia, as Sianne Ngai has defined, is a 'failure – on the part of subjects to grasp global capitalism's social totality in formal or representational terms'. Here we begin to grapple with a kind of doublethink: it's not easy to invoke or harbour paranoia without running the risk of being accused of delusion – a feeling that may require considerable time for it to be proven as fact, but which remains an uncontested reality for those who are living it. Are you following me here? I can't help myself: I *am* paranoid, having lived in similarly eerie conditions. It is the Orwellian 'logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it'. There are increasingly more parallels. I know what it looks like, what it feels like, my body acting as a container that retains past signals even if it is also made up of leakages. Everything appears uncannier and uncannier as the real becomes more desirous, and as the real becomes swallowed up.

The more authenticity can be extracted from something, the more reason there is to celebrate it. 'Honest', 'unflinching', 'raw': these are some adjectives that arise from this propensity. Based on a true story. So true, king! Authenticity makes one hell of a good story. I did enjoy *Tiger King*. Even if things end up becoming clichés after they are first brought to the surface, as quickly discarded as they are valued due to the sheer fact of their mere repetition, they often return via the lens of the nostalgic – which, as Svetlana Boym observes in *The Future of Nostalgia*, is a 'historical emotion'. At its Greek root, the word refers to the pain of an old wound. We can keep picking at it until it bleeds, never having the opportunity to generate new skin. Authentic cultural narratives; an authentic social media identity; an

authentic meal – the running theme here appears to be that they are almost always considered through the limits of someone else’s subjectivity. Authenticity is rarely my own. And yet it is a claim accorded to me.

When we don’t believe in something, whether due to insufficient testimonial, misplaced avarice or outright prejudice, we tend to call it a ‘grift’, like that’s supposed to be the worst insult imaginable, like that should be the undermining thing. A fraud. A hack. Is Li Ziqi, an ethereal young woman who subsists on her family’s rural Sichuanese farm and documents herself picking and planting crops on her YouTube channel, a grift? Is Lao Gan Ma, that kindly middle-aged woman on the face of all those jars of chilli oil, whose popularity outside of China stemmed from Chinese consumers preferring foods that ‘perfectly encapsulate regional cuisines and use ingredients grown from the soil of those regions’ a grift? Food writer Cathy Erway suspects that her very image satisfies ‘a nostalgia for socialist China and a simpler time’. Is what we consider ‘artificial intelligence’ a grift when we realise that the ‘intelligence’ is in fact not ‘artificial’ but propped up by an invisible army of low-paid human workers? Research has found that humans are more likely to believe disinformation generated by artificial intelligence.

As an ideal, we can keep on polishing the facets of an authentic self, for legitimacy is always just around the corner. It is a work of fiction, in the end. Some of the places and situations are based, to some degree, on places that exist and events that have occurred; the characters populating the places and situations are made up. Remember when the Pope wore that full-length white puffer jacket that looked like it fit so well? Me neither.

LINGUA FRANCA

FUCK'S SAKE!

WAH LAU!

MY WORD!

WTF!

It wasn't until I was well into adulthood when I learned that 'chalet' was a word in French to mean 'holiday home' and not a word in Singlish to mean 'holiday home'. Supposedly less emphasis on either syllable. By then, my brain had already been, as is wont to say, 'internet poisoned'. Netspeak: the cadence of the extremely online, a cacophony of profiles hungry for community and connection. The internet was where I furthered my education in writing, discoursing and conversing and communicating and arguing and attempting, but not speaking aloud. Until recently I thought 'banal' rhymed with 'anal,' and

even now I have to say ‘impetus’ twice to get it correct. Eem-pee-tss. Same goes for ‘euphemism.’ You-fair-mi-zm. But who cares. Everyone knows what I’m saying.

Think about it: some kinds of speech are pure internet brain. There, that was one example of internet brain. Let’s try again: internet brain is a mass affliction, a global vice we’re all complicit in, a playground of individuality and mimicry turned up to ten. Do you ever think, why me internet brain? And then the void answers.

Me: No one: Of course that’s internet brain too.

As the unattributed saying goes, ‘The web was invented in Switzerland, and the computer was invented in the United Kingdom, but the internet is North American.’ Before it was to even begin, the premise of that story had already been set up: the English that the internet spoke would adopt a certain flair, directed by those with more visibility and reproduced by others to much affect. Some thievery too. I mean, wot a vibe. I’ve never said that out loud. But like I’ve definitely engaged with these ways of expression – pretty next level, amirite? Screaming crying throwing up. Babe, slay! Open one window and are you able to block out these dates, see attached. Open another window and lol r u srs ... tbh wild ... hmu l8r. The next window goes fucken stg why would I make this up man; and then the next window something like my bandwidth for this is low, but I suppose we can try and set this up for the next few weeks; and then in the next window sorry that sounds toxic as fuck, hope you’re doing – Congratulations! You Have Won! Inside yet another window, Patricia Lockwood writes, ‘It had [...] once been the place where you sounded like yourself. Gradually it had become the place where we sounded like each other.’

TALK COCK SING SONG

BLATHER ON

TALK THROUGH YOUR ARSE

TL;DR

I only really know English. Several words in Mandarin (from when I paid attention in school), a few words in Japanese (from all the anime I watched), some words in Malay (from when a few minahs allowed me to join their friend group at a McDonald's we worked at), some words in French (from when I had a brief flirtation with a Belgian woman), a few words in Bahasa Indonesia (from when I picked it up among Indonesian punx), a smattering of words in German (from when I thought it was a lofty language to try and learn). There are other odds and ends (hygge, molto bene, mukbang, hiraeth), which I gleaned as a result of being extremely online. But English is the language I dream in.

When they said 'live the dream' I felt it. Dreaming bleeds into speaking bleeds into writing. The English I know culminates in three established varieties: British (because Received Pronunciation, or at least its simulation, in an ex-colony causes people to cream their pants), Singlish (because it was a common English that migrants could use to understand each other as Asians united in a new colony) and Ocker (because it was – as a new settler–migrant – and remains spoken in the circles I move in). And the fourth kind haha it's rather obvs but then you lowkey already know lmfao. Not flexing btw.

So – liddat lor. That's my story. You can say, eh why you never tell me earlier, I was trying to figure out your accent. But

I've never been fully compelled to. If you know, you know, you know? Sometimes silence means it's such a non-event that you have accepted it and taken it for granted; sometimes logorrhoea means it's something you still need to convince yourself what for. You can say, of course lah, you Chinese–Singaporean what, why would you experience shame at code-switching when you've never had to try and be seen in your formative life? It's true: I chose invisibility because I was allowed to. As a light-skinned anglophone, it's easy to fall into step with it; there are no hard questions, only a convenient path that's been pre-lit by centuries of dominance. That's the thing I'm still working out – how to pursue shapelessness while concreting a self that is mutable? I don't wish to wring my hands and be all like, I go to the west become POC then how, then even if I haven't spoken Singlish for years I suddenly make a performance of it because it's authentic OK. Stay true to your roots.

Did you know that chicken rice originated from Hainan Island? And that roti prata was originally called parotta, from Kerala? And then you cross the Causeway to Malay(si)a and it kena call roti canai; no longer a round, flattened shape but cut up into slivers. That's no croissant for ya. Betwixt the routes of capital and trade lies a kind of evolution from the supreme-same, each iteration remade to its time and place. I'm a child of empire, but I'm also a child of my time. And when both crash headlong into each other willy-nilly and pell-mell, what ya reckon is gonna happen? It's not supposed to be a mess; it's supposed to be a comfortable disharmony. Five foot three. 160cm. Who can say? I don't give two shits. You say I say who confirm? Two wrongs don't make a right. You can believe in two things at once though. Bit weird innit.

WHY YOU SO LIDDAT?

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?

YOU RIGHT MATE?

U OK?

It depends on who I'm speaking to. No one goes into the meeting room and switches over to their party voice unless they already hold some kind of power. No one goes into the kopitiam begging for pardon either. I mean, some do – but that's their prerogative. What I'm trying to say is you're not the same to your drinking friend to your lover to your colleague to your internet friend to your casual acquaintance to your dog. But equally, we are living in a time where these boundaries are becoming superfluous, which can ironically prompt a chase for that one single self. Cannot lah. Absolutely impossible. When I'm on LSD I can't speak because I can't decide which voice I'd like to use. Blimey! And when I do try it's kinda all of them. I wrote this essay dead-set sober though.

Originally this essay started out as a plea for understanding. Whose understanding? Some kind of centre. I wanted to explain, oh, here's how it all began and how it evolved. Straight-up pulp to the shithouse. Then I didn't look at it for three years and realised my understanding of the centre had collapsed. Which is to say I no longer give a shit. You know that Marilyn Monroe quote: I don't even know if she actually said it. But chuck it on my Pinterest gravestone in Comic Sans font size 20 when I die.

Now I'm being facetious. There's no good side or bad side. As if I needed to spell it out hey. Sucked in. I could write some

pithy thing about this sort of self-discovery being a part of the human condition. Which isn't to say that I think I'm above or below it; rather it's that I would be more happy to not try and peg it as either a universal thing or an individual thing. Verily, as Aimé Césaire once wrote, 'I am not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the universal.' Ya I don't think it's really that simple.

Sometimes I watch too much *Peep Show* and my inner monologue begins to adopt a comic Britishness. When I binged on *Seinfeld*, a generic New York accent filled my mind, its irritating lilt and vocal fry taking over my consciousness. As a kid, I watched *Masters of the Sea* and thought its clipped Singapore Standard English an aspirational marker, then flicked over to the next channel where the zany *Animaniacs* screamed at me, also aspirational. Same goes for Aussie dramas. New to the Yabba? Best place in Australia. God be a useless cunt! Why put it on the internet for every hairy dick and fanny to see? The linguistic hegemony will be televised. In an essay interrogating what he describes as the individualist yet homogeneous 'Kinfolk aesthetic', and which he later developed to call 'Airspace', Kyle Chayka wryly notes his own inclination towards the same: 'Lined up, they seem like the punchline of a joke at my own expense, the reduction of an identity to a few arbitrary objects, and yet I feel an unjustifiable loyalty to them as mine'.

ANYHOW ONLY

HELTER-SKELTER

SLAPDASH

CHAOTIC ENERGY

I once put on my Ocker voice to a Singaporean friend. Another time, I put on my Singlish voice to an Australian friend. Both occasions remain vivid in my mind: the concurrent feeling of pride and disgust. I felt dirty in different ways – decadent and debased. Neither felt good. The responses were different too. Wah, can lah. And: he he he. It's damn odd when you have to choose. What if they were both (and all) an amalgamation? But everyone loves a linear story.

My lover has heard them all. He has experienced his own version of code-switching too. Years ago, I remember drunkenly explaining to one of my chosen brothers – who has also known me both in the old country and new – that I would like to not stand out as much as it is humanly possible. Yet still be myself. A performance of sorts that arises from reaction. You know, *we live in a society*. His silent assent spoke volumes. When we chat, we defer to internet lingo anyway, our respective histories bleeding into the tone, unifying and discordant; a solidarity through difference. He has his own voice, too, a combination of old and new. The borders of the nation-state are intractable between us, thanks to the thing (punk) that saved our lives.

If this preoccupation with linearity isn't the pursuit of purity I literally have no idea what it is. It incorporates a sleight of hand: everyone loves deviating from the script until it becomes incomprehensible or unaspirational to a centre. Why should we want to understand unbelonging? Why should we strive towards

an indistinguishable separation? There's a sense of hypothetical loss – like a thing you keep imagining will disappear, so your actions cause it to disappear. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym writes that 'this points to a paradox of institutionalised nostalgia: the stronger the loss, the more it is overcompensated with commemorations, the starker the distance from the past, and the more it is prone to idealisations.' History's influence is strong; it reduces the imagination. I don't feel myself wanting to reach towards that original Wenchang chicken rice because I know it's not there – it's become nasi ayam, cơm gà rau thơm and khao man gai. Who knows what else. But the unsullied past is like a healing wound: even if the present is worse, how many people actually remember? It's the feeling of invincibility that's being sold, an untouchability that makes for a fixation, a fixed unmoving stasis. And as the past envelops the present, I feel the future slipping from my grip.

Ya lah exactly – you say I say who confirm? The all-seeing internet, to a certain extent, and then we re-release it to the trappings of amnesia. A habit is a habit is a habit, or 'a stitch in time saves nine'. I can rattle off a series of these idioms and then I'll unthinkingly say 'all's well that ends well' to someone I'm washing dishes with and they'll be like, 'stop talking like a fucken book mate'. But what to do, I read more than I talk. Also no one trained me. How bay-nal.

NOT HERE TO FUCK SPIDERS

DON'T WASTE TIME LEH

STOP FAFFING ABOUT

MONUMENTAL WASTE OF TIME

It goes without saying: the English language has a persisting imperial legacy; each vernacular with its specific violences and multiple enduring dogmas baked into its core. Could its many variations possibly exist on their own? When the desire for empire was set in stone it sought to annihilate anything that was in its way. It's still happening, of course, albeit in more insidious ways. Nah, you're all right, mate. Tsk. Why you get in my way? I am super not all right, but whatevs.

Yiyun Li poses a similar question: 'Can one's intelligence rely entirely on the public language; can one form a precise thought, recall an accurate memory, or even feel a genuine feeling, with only the public language?' In the old country, someone who can code-switch between Singlish and English is regarded as more educated than someone who can only speak Singlish. Yet those who only speak English are perceived as hifalutin, their authenticity as Singaporeans doubted – go to angmoh school then come back damn up and kantang you know? In the fifty-nine years since Singapore's formal independence from British colonial powers, Singlish has similarly been discouraged and frowned upon, as much as it has been appropriated by the educated to signal a fetishistic closeness to culture. It has evolved from being 'a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans', buttered over with a 'Speak Good English Movement', to a new wave of local ad copy reflecting Singlish words and sayings, all

in the span of the last two decades. You can bloody read a book full of Singlish poetry now sial. They give him prize somemore.

Nearly one billion people in the world speak English as a secondary tongue. At the time of writing, 60.7 per cent of all web content is in English, while 25.9 per cent of internet users use English as their primary language. How like that? In Rey Chow's *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience*, she writes of an 'interlinguality' in which 'there can be no pure linguistic practice because the use of one language is habitually interfered with by the vying availability of others'. Slip slop slap. The pool of the self just keeps pooling around our feet, influenced by its speakers' many living languages that, despite their preexisting structures and rubric, continue to reinvent themselves over time. Don't gostan please – if you said the phrase 'social distancing' to me before 2020 I'd be like wtf you going on about, and before that you tell me to chillax I tell you to stop your microaggressions.

As Chow posits, 'How [does one] strive for self-recognition even as one is forced to efface oneself in the process of speaking and writing?' It must be noted that much of what is perceived as Singlish in the popular imagination often uses Chinese as a starting point. Here, another kind of hegemony presents itself: in a discussion surrounding the creole, Alfian Sa'at points out that 'any authority on Singlish needs to be fluent in at least four languages so as to avoid any kinds of biases that might arise from their own linguistic background'.

Bloody oath. I said 'strewth' once, in earnest, and someone laughed at me. Nek minnit a white Kiwi acquaintance said 'grouse' and it was ironically cool. Hard out, bitch. All of which is to say these sayings involve an affectation that eventually (dis)integrates into a newer form, like a Pokémon evolution. But this entirely depends on how one is perceived. Do your own thing

hey, or as James Baldwin once opined, “The range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island make England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else”.

What would the history of language be if not for its malleability? See it trend hard enough; revived from the dusty annals of history; invented, fade away, come back, disappear again. I could tell you I was ‘solastalgic’ for home in the ‘Anthropocene’, a digital abode and abyss forfeited to gentrification and adulating – no more already – but there has never been a home except the one I made for myself. Tell you what though: the secret is always relearning, a backdrop that seems indecipherable until an expansive vortex opens up. Sounds cooked but it’s like the sea; very on-brand but open, open, open, to whatever that falls alongside it. A jumbled reconfiguration that insists on imperviousness. We glimpsed a window, we jumped through it.

BY SIGNALLING NOTHING I REMAIN OPAQUE

‘The light of the future casts the shadows of tomorrow.’

Sun Ra, *A Joyful Noise*

‘And what would you rather I talk about at the beginning, if not this transparency whose aim was to reduce us? Because, if I don’t begin there, you will see me consumed with the sullen jabber of childish refusal, convulsive and powerless. This is where I start.’

Édouard Glissant, ‘On Opacity’, *Poetics of Relation*



Discontent

Where to begin? It seems that by even beginning to write this it is bound to fail. How do you capture the spirit of subversion? How does one manage a critique of critical engagement?

Did cynicism kill the idealist or did the idealist kill cynicism? Others who've lived longer may tell you a different thing. It arises from a similar thread, this grief of our houses being broken into, but maybe the problem is that the houses weren't even ours in the first place. We made them visible and some saw potential gain. And it's just decades upon decades building up now.

In *The Freezer Door*, a book on gentrification, belonging and (queer) desire, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore writes:

Remembering when the goal was to make popular culture irrelevant, so we could create something else. Remembering when the goal was creating unpopular culture. I'm pretty sure this is a parody of a construction site – the only problem is they're constructing a real building. The cult of responsibility, and the culture of irresponsibility – are these the same thing?

I look around me and see entrepreneurs: we DIY-ed our way into subsistence. Doesn't matter if it's through being a DJ, a jeweller, a magazine editor, a musician, a podcaster, a comics artist, a photographer, a designer, a curator. The list goes on. The fact is that some of us yeeted our way into existence: some with money, some with other forms of privilege, some with a luckless grit, some through a combo of the lot.

We flung our ideas into the networked abyss for shits and giggles, and the system that we hated actually

loved us so much. They saw edge and novelty and lives fully lived. [REDACTED] But what else could we have done in this cruel world – we would either be wastoids or houseless or dead. This is not hyperbole.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Mostly because I've been hiding behind the scrim of subculture since I found it. That sense of belonging that's utterly unparalleled, and where nation-states don't count. Let your freak flag fly. But do you see what I mean? By doing this I'm already pre-empting failure – by claiming authenticity or maxi-autonomy is to hurtle this argument to the ground, its weight crushed by its premise. Let me rephrase it: engaging in the act of accusation is to open you up to social inquiry.

[REDACTED]

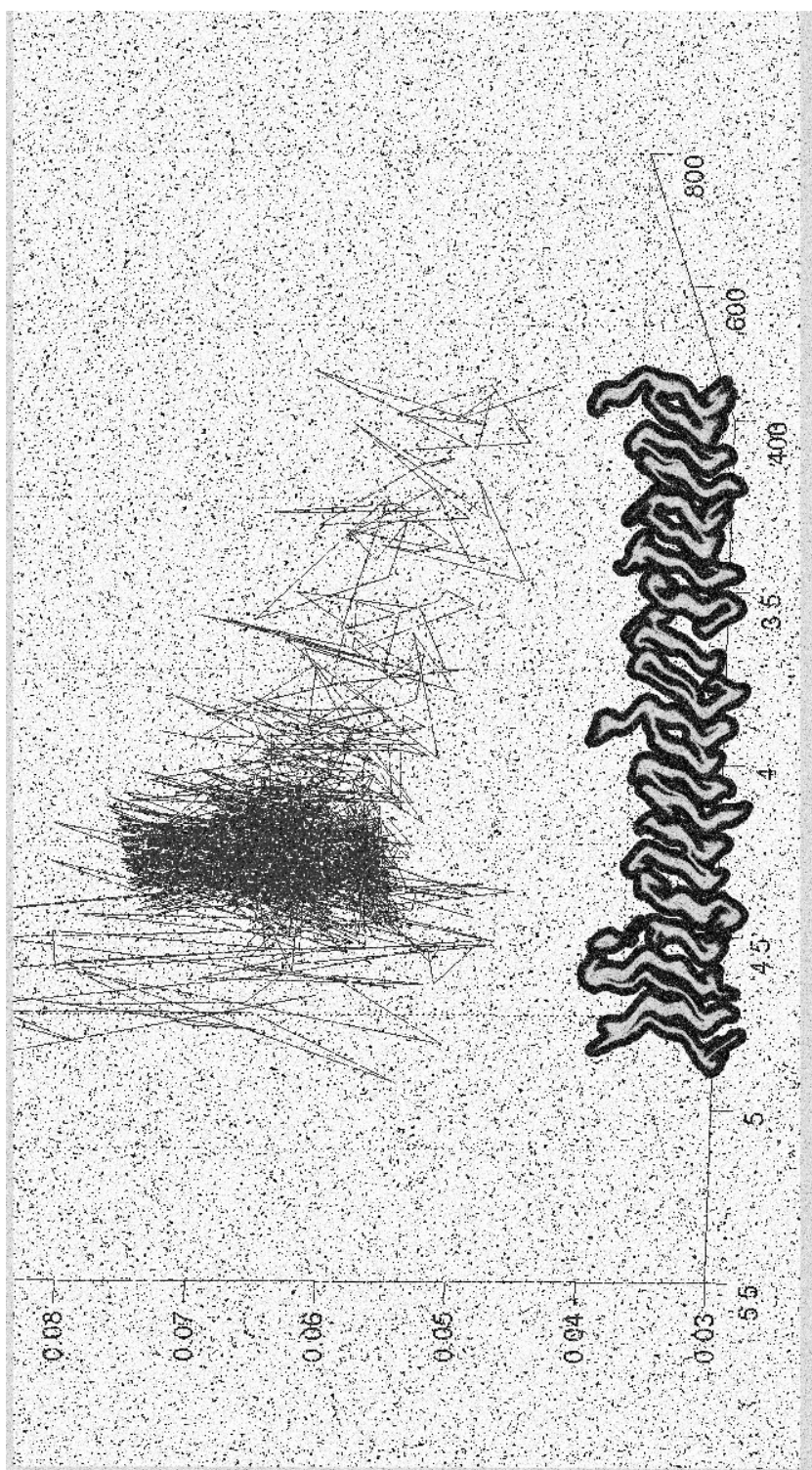
We've made this mistake before! To romanticise the oneness of alterity is to deny that there are differences. Sycamore again: 'When anything becomes homogeneous, there's a problem. When anything becomes so homogeneous that people don't even think about it, that's worse'. Difference is to discord is to conflict is to uneasy resolution. Or so one would hope. It's strange; I have spent half of my life in a social realm I know to be profoundly self-contradictory. There's a certain claim to uniqueness, but most also prefer to be regarded as part of a monolith; it's where we find our homes – whether to engage in art or activism or care or camaraderie or all of the above. Perhaps this is the loophole neoliberal forces found in order to worm their way in, but here's the contradiction again: were we ever that autonomous? Did we ever completely drop out? Of course not. That's why I'm writing this now.

In what I regard as a companion text to *The Freezer Door*, Sarah Schulman in *The Gentrification of the Mind* observes:

... they admired their predecessors who had created change through confrontation, alienation and truth-telling. But their professional instincts led them in different directions: accommodation, social positioning, even unconscious manoeuvring of the queer content they did have so that it was depoliticised, personalised and not about power.

Some agents let their freak flag fly until they got absorbed. It's nice to feel like you're changing the world; it's nice to feel like you're the cool kid; it's nice to feel like people are finally taking you seriously. [REDACTED]

Is it nice? Maybe for a little while. Then I think to myself: I've gone and aired our dirty laundry again. And for the sake of what? Perhaps this is due to the absence of a relationship with a mother. I just want to be seen, to be held, to be wondered upon. [REDACTED]



Quit the vague shit. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

What a funny fucking world. I can lament about gentrification and accelerationism and equally be a victim *and* a perpetrator. It's just that the feedback loop – mind you, laundered through the didacticism of truth-telling – would rather discourage that certainty can be double-edged. Or maybe Virginie Despentes was right, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I mean, if she didn't become visible the probability of that reaching me would probably have been slim to none.

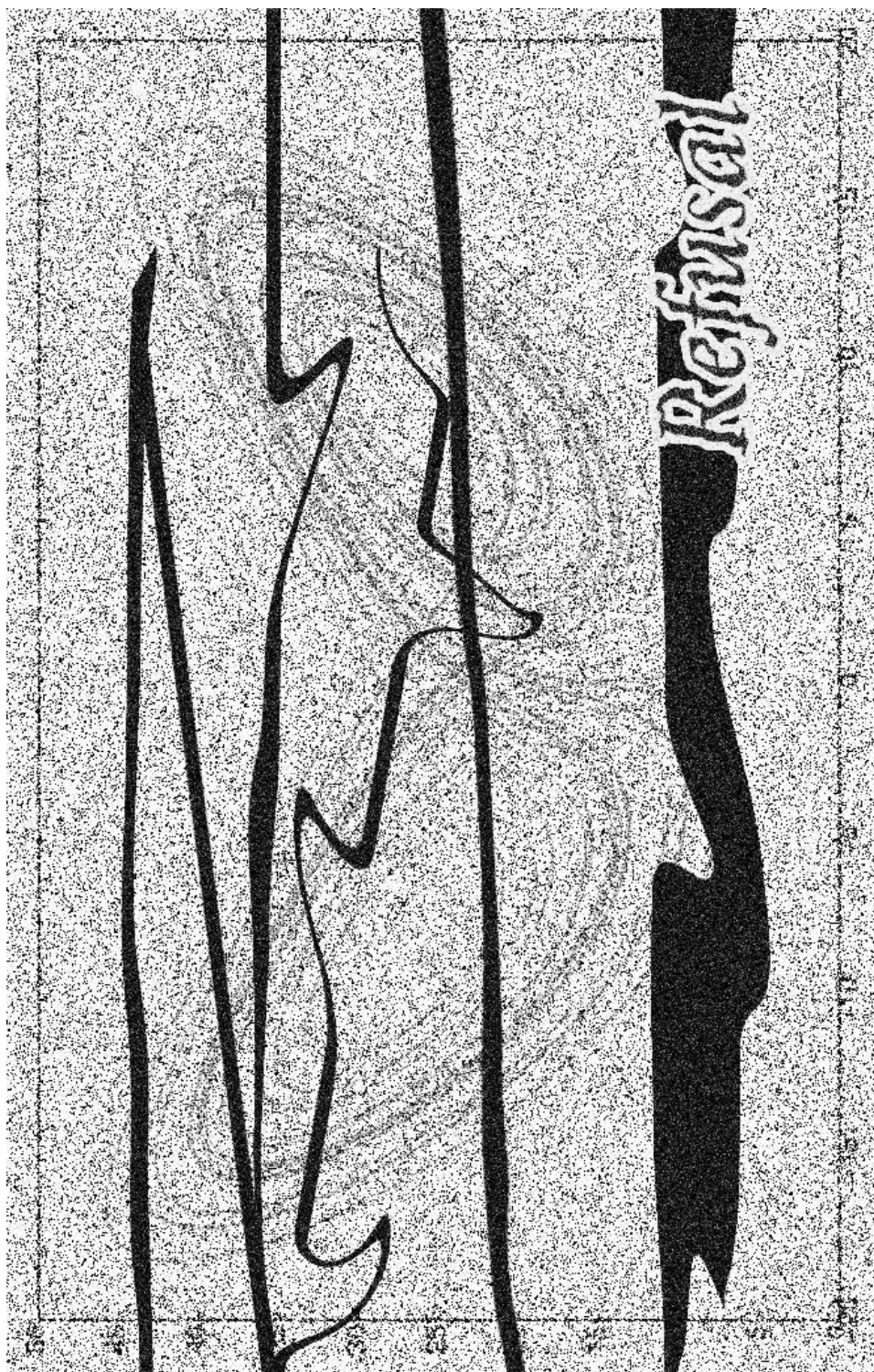
[REDACTED] No game plan – cut the shit, start the pit. Much like the numerous d-beat bands of yore, cultural artefacts created from similar standpoints contain a distaste or displeasure communicated through language taken out of context, revelling in the attendant lifestyles evinced through aesthetics and populist ideology. I'm Disrupting the status quo! I'm Dismantling all that came before! Then start-up culture took everything and ran. Now we hear of tech moguls narrating a similar life story: I came from nothing, I dropped out of school, I want to change the world, I want to scale the fuck up. Disrupt, disrupt, disrupt. Meanwhile, 'takeovers' of institutions – via the language of 'collaboration' wherein those considered on the 'margins' are 'invited' to express themselves via the cultural capital of said institutions – reign supreme. Contracts are signed, hands shaken, profiles elevated. Doesn't matter where the money comes from, best not to think about its origins. I see myself continually returning to *The Society of the Spectacle*, trying to find answers: 'The spectacle is not a collection

of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images'. Another classic Debord-ism: 'Every given commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others, and attempts to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one'.

Now I'm just drifting. But I've always been drifting, I guess.

I say to some of my oldest friends (and a couple of strangers online): do you remember the times when we could spot someone across the street in a band t-shirt and go up and say hello? You may not strike up a close friendship, per se, but you're bound to find some common thread, one that doesn't rest on the purely aesthetic even if the initial camaraderie was presupposed by an aesthetic. I'm not sure if the rise of normcore (actual power keeps a low profile) has lowered this probability; we're more atomised due to social media, other people are doing it in extra top-secret domains and it's not possible to know. The thing about the slipperiness of sub- and counterculture is that they're always morphing to suit the times, and you either morph with them or get left behind, stuck in some semblance of nostalgia, the carefree and wondrous affect attached to youth. The underground has been driven further and further below and to the outside it appears as if it's still up for grabs via the attention economy. But here's the conundrum: to find a collective one has to show oneself. Some people are making a living out of it.

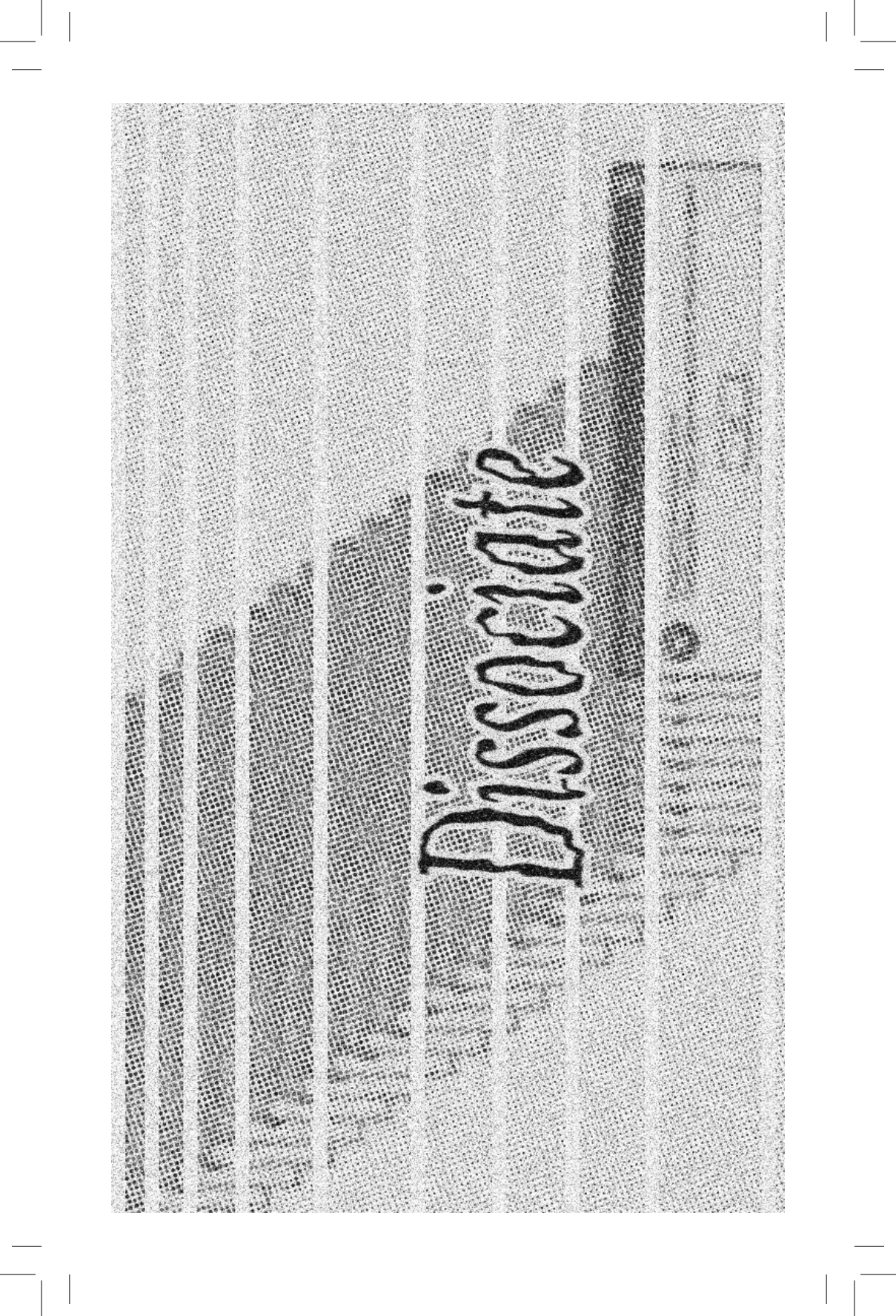
Refusal



It's a viscosity I can't explain. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] This way I don't fucking owe
anyone anything. [REDACTED]
What do I mean I don't know? Of course I know. I know there are
vultures in my midst ready to pull the rug out from under my feet.
[REDACTED]

I can also say: on-demand streaming services and the networked
life did this. But they also made lots of things accessible to those
who otherwise would not have found them, like how I, for the
very first time in my life, found belonging as a lonely, suicidal teen.
[REDACTED] A fellow writer (an acquaintance,
queer, older) once pointed out that I was potentially invoking a
MAGA-ism by speaking about the gentrification of counterculture
in this way. I recognise this as a certain kind of gatekeeping, like the
generation before me who thought selling out was for losers. Then
my generation made the term an anachronism completely and then
they wanted to cash in too. [REDACTED]

I fear that by even grasping at these mere notions I am
perpetuating the nostalgia of before, a wilful amnesia that leads to
erasure before transformation can begin. When Schulman writes
that gentrified thinking is '... a social position rooted in received
wisdom, with aesthetics blindly selected from the presorted offerings
of marketing and without information or awareness about the
structures that create its own delusional sense of infallibility', I nod
to myself but simultaneously wonder if this is a paradox – that when
one asserts certain ideas that result in an intellectual dead-end, one
then entrenches the conditions that brought about the criticism in
the first place. It's akin to what Svetlana Boym notes in *The Future
of Nostalgia*: 'The nostalgic is looking for a spiritual addressee.
Encountering silence, he looks for memorable signs, desperately
misreading them.'



Dissociate

How does one draw the parameters of outsider-hood? Where does the border begin? To witness that wee crack snap open and then declare ‘this is my life now; this is what I will do.’

██████████ – it is easy to regurgitate received wisdoms; it’s how they get enshrined as history. But it’s a certain life’s work, not a costume one easily slips in and out of, not a language one can rote-learn into existence. ██████████

██████████ The walls are closing in. I don’t want to re-create that stilted history, but I also do not want to see a decontextualised present. The ones who could not survive their own epochs are dead; I am somewhat happy for them – they do not have to bear witness to this grief.

This isn’t a unique proposition. Counterculture has been declared dead too many times to count: by ██████████
██████████ And each time, these proclamations were from figures who are and were the most visible. What does that say? Outside the online spaces now evermore dictated by context collapse and the aforementioned attention economy, dark forests teem, each one bristling with a sense of desire, a desire to overturn the status quo yet again. It’s just decades and decades building up now. We can’t make sense of the present until it becomes retrospective. For now, we can only keep planting seeds and hope for the best.

I remember disagreements and obstinacy in conversations that arise away from the keyboard, like the time I went to ██████████ and argued with a friend ██████████
██████████ What was the agenda? It was that we both wanted to be loved, and equally believe in contradictory things (because we all believe in contradictory things). Difference is to discord is to conflict is to uneasy resolution. We were

both so angry and we both wanted to win, but after we woke up the next morning we allowed ourselves to concede to an awkward impasse, that we are all in the same weird, mad place trying to find joy in the chaos. I did not concede to them; they did not concede to me – we just agreed to be bound by an understanding of difference, and that we were both in pain.

Of course, in a world where even those on the right can now be considered anti-establishment, it's difficult to parse a sense of solidarity and desire that isn't obstructed by hyperbole and aggressive loneliness, where weirdness is both novel and individualised. This is how edgelords are born. I don't get off on aloneness or uniqueness – for me, weirdness has always been social; it is the normality of weirdness amongst others that allows my self to continue the work of living.

Another recent memory: I was interviewing someone whom I got to know within so-called professional writing circles, and I asked them if they thought authenticity was a scam. What they said surprised me. They said that if authenticity was defined by identity then it could be, but if it was defined by affect then there is nothing wrong with being sincere. In fact, it is fine to be sincere, because that is where action happens. It reminds me of what Kathy Acker wrote in *Don Quixote*: 'Language presupposes community. Therefore without you, nothing I say has any meaning.'

Yet the double-bind is that this is also the kind of authenticity institutions try and grab at. Not an identity per se, for identities are amorphous, but the type of sincerity that comes from passion, camaraderie and belief. Some naïveté, perhaps. What do these dead-eyed people – most of whom are churned out by the university industrial complex, even if they'd like to 'learn' and 'engage' – truly care about? Why did you not learn in your multiple degrees what we did? Why did

we not learn in our lived experiences what you did? But they are most often the ones with the money; they are the ones financing our survival in this futureless world. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Even more tricky is telling apart the lambs from the wolves. But I'll again recall the words of Glissant:

How can one point out these limits without lapsing into skepticism or paralysis? How can one reconcile the hard line inherent in any politics and the questioning essential to any relation? Only by understanding that it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth he [they] would not have generated on his [their] own. That is, within the opacity of his [their] time and place.

WHO'S YOUR NORMIE?

‘Being normal is a nervous place, because you can never finish performing your relation to it.’

Lauren Berlant, in an interview with *Cabinet Magazine*

I.

It is easy to find weirdness everywhere we look, but never normality. Normality is a rare and exulted state of being that's so normal it hardly begets attention. It's the paragon of virtue, the form to strive towards, the ideal condition that, once achieved, exists without fanfare, completely invisible. Normal slips between the cracks.

Like a ghost, normal silently inhabits spaces. No one cares to do a double-take. Normal bodies just are. Normal dispositions

pass through walls like wisps in the night, a prevailing presence that's unquestionably all around us. Perhaps someone will question a slight chill, but the passing doubt gets shrugged off as soon as it's uttered.

It doesn't require belabouring: people know normal exists. But it's baked so indelibly into the fabric of life that to question it can seem absurd. Like money, we're not so stupid to believe that it's meaningful, yet we hold on to its value for dear life.

We herald 'the new normal': X inches out Y to win each unprecedented prize, each iteration more normal than the next. With every announcement, a new standard is found – it hints at a sliding scale that's consistently on the look-out for the next big thing that's just unusual enough to satisfy normal desires. Normal is smugly satisfied with itself, yet it's always glancing over its shoulder to confirm its normalcy.

If weirdness is omnipresent, then it only takes an excess of normal to point it out. 'That's so weird!' someone exclaims, eager to define their normal. 'I'm feeling weird' as a recognition of off-kilterness, because normal is the default setting. Cursed images are weird, because we can't put our finger on it, explain away the weirdness. Talking aloud to yourself in public is weird. Not wearing shoes outside the house is weird. Not brushing your teeth until after breakfast is weird. Taking pictures of your food was weird, but now it's normal. Video rental stores used to be normal, but now they're weird. What's normal where you live and weird in the rest of the world?

It depends on who you ask.

II.

Five years old. The same old story. Deviating from the status quo and made to feel like shit. Except I was living in a Chinese-majority country where I am, luckily, also Chinese. But there were always going to be other deviations, that spot on the pristine carpet many want to be the first to discover even if it isn't really there. Too-hairy arms ('for a girl'). A clumsy demeanour. A kid whose parents couldn't help her with her homework past primary school. A little devil who would single-handedly destroy all her classmates' paintings, only to be locked in a broom closet afterwards as punishment. A smart-arse who would answer questions too quickly in class but didn't (know how to) socialise otherwise. A child who didn't understand their own mental illnesses because it didn't seem abnormal to them in their brain. A girl who found it easier to make friends with boys because she wasn't attracted to them, only to be called a slut. A queer, in more ways than one.

Theft and delinquency, a vow to drop out of school because 'no one understands'; a dysfunctional relationship with blood family who were too overworked and too miserable to provide care. A gnawing dissatisfaction with life that would lead to dead-end jobs, each reckless venture a new chapter in a disjointed narrative that wouldn't stick. Subcultures that would later save me, even if I gradually grew disillusioned with their social dynamics, but by then it was too late to rewrite my pathetic history. No matter – I'd dug my own grave.

It's funny how weirdness is defined in group settings: transgressions committed with a group are fine, sometimes even immortalised or heralded (as in Jonestown, or the Lisbon girls in *The Virgin Suicides*). Alone, deviation reeks of abjectness (as in Lovecraft's Outsider, Mao Sugiyama, Divine in *Pink Flamingos*)

– as if to ask, ‘How are you like this ... without overt guidance?’ We are herd animals. It appears deranged. But few people think to ask about the hows and whys that came before. Some may ascribe it to fate, but they’re all single chapters in an irrational whole, shrewd in its rationality.

When it comes to conversations around deviation and normality, the question always stands: what came first, the weird kid or the kid who chose to be weird? Except no one is born weird; that gets determined by how lucky one is to move around within spaces where you don’t stand out. Trip up, and one small deviation leads to another and then yet another and before you even understand what they mean each one welds itself closely to the last one to form your personal normal, and then that’s it, the game is up. Deleuze and Guattari were referring to love and sex in *A Thousand Plateaus*, but I don’t see how that can’t be applied to the occurrences that pulse through our lives, the non-loving circumstances and non-sexual coincidences that, at its core, are also loving and sexual: ‘We each go through so many bodies in each other’.

Weirdness is a spiral that’s like the eye that only sees itself, painfully obvious to normalcy, but is completely normal all on its own. How did I know I did ‘weird shit’? Only when other people would point it out. And then I’d hang out with a bunch of other 30-something misfits and we’d be the most normal thing in the world.

III.

Talk about weirdness, and it’s almost always immediately relegated to felons, angsty teenagers, miscreants, the criminally insane – basically, those who end up rejecting normalcy, whether

on purpose, by accident or chance, for reasons attributed to desperation, mental disorder, childish rebellion, something unnameable. The jury is out when it comes to deciding how many people consider themselves weird; instead, most think they're above average. Which is to say, a bit more normal than normal. Many would prefer not to scream weirdness from the rooftops. That's something only children and lunatics do.

For years I desperately wanted to be normal. The effortless gait some people use to waltz around the world, the ease in which they relate to others, the syrupy way in which language tumbles out of their mouths like molten lava, the respect they gain from others just by being themselves. The normal things they say that go unquestioned, the weird things they utter that get irrepressibly accepted as normal. 'All the world's a stage', of course, but some actors are better than others.

Alcoholism and drug abuse sometimes begin in this way. No one starts off explicitly thinking that they want to be dependent on meth or smack or grog in order to feel more alive; it's always an accidental escape, an unthinking convenience that becomes habitual. It helps with keeping up. A price to pay to feel a fleeting normal, only to feel less normal once their effects subside. Scholars write and speak about 'passing' – if you pass it means you've managed to successfully fly under the radar. No one is aware that you're even supposed to be an aberration. They'll be disappointed and betrayed once they find out. Passing takes work, it's an art form. For some, passing can be a vice.

As capitalism advances its grip, normal continues to mutate. In 2013, the term 'normcore' was coined by trend-casting group K-HOLE, 'to understand that there is no such thing as normal'. Normcore allows people to become indistinguishably weird: according to journalist Christopher Glazek, 'it's about infinitely flexible, sunny appropriation', noting that 'the point

of normcore is that you could dress like a NASCAR mascot for a big race and then switch to raver-wear for a long druggy night at the club'. And while it's not a fashion trend per se, more a type of vibe alignment packaged within an externalised form of personality creation – once you start to see normcore, normcore is everywhere. When the idea of normal gets eaten up into normcore, there's no such thing as weird – we're all weird, until it's too weird. Normcore takes passing as normal to new heights, yet turns it on its head: everyone is just trying to pass.

Next to normal, normcore looks like its anxious cousin. It's both a mask and a sign-off: normcore conceals weirdness, but it's also an opportunity to scream I'M NORMAL!!!!!! at the world. It's hard to tell the difference.

IV.

In our metamodern era, proclaiming yourself a weirdo lends a form of cultural cachet. Proclamations such as, 'I'm pretty random'. Or, 'I'm such a nerd!' Other things like, 'I hate people'. 'These people are such normies lol'. Or to quote an actual caricature (Frances in *Normal People*), 'things matter more to me than they do normal people'. In certain circles, weirdness holds an inordinate amount of social currency – to be a normie means you've failed. How can I be weirder than someone else? The internet gives us clues:

1. Do the unexpected;
2. Get distracted by ordinary things;
3. Dance like a maniac with no music in an ordinary place and then walk away like nothing happened;
4. Don't go out of your way to be too different!

The cult of individuality acts as a guidebook to weirdness. If you're strange enough you'll be warranted interest, which allows your self to be quantified. Weird is wonderful (and bankable). When spectacle generates profit, 'interesting' holds court, becoming a type of aesthetic discernment which Sianne Ngai defines as 'a tension between wonder and reason', an 'unsatisfied longing' that can 'be somewhat "good" even when it's largely "bad"'. It is in these conditions that interestingness becomes prescribed. Like a Pinterest mood-board, weirdness is a decontextualised pastiche of what on the surface doesn't appear to gel, a projection that desires value.

But weirdness occupies a hierarchy, too. If being white is normal then a white weirdo is trendy. If an able body is normal, then weirdness inhabited by a disabled body ends up being even more contemptible. Throw in class, standards of beauty, sexuality, gender. Nabokov: 'The colour of one's creed, neckties, eyes, thoughts, manners, speech, is sure to meet somewhere in time of space with a fatal objection from a mob that hates that particular tone.' The rooms that exist on the spectrum live in a big house with no windows.

Being weird may mean you're an individual, but please remember: don't go out of your way to be too different! We will keep consuming until we become the weirdo we want to see in the world, each permutation retroactively weirder than the next until the vortex shrinks back into itself to restore normalcy once again: Lady Gaga as crust-punk is to Avril Lavigne on being the 'Sid Vicious of the new generation' is to Alien Kulture is to Diane Arbus writing 'Last Supper' in her diary before killing herself is to Yayoi Kusama voluntarily choosing to live in a psychiatric asylum is to the denizens of Mortville in *Desperate Living*. Et cetera, until it gets too weird to bear, the pinball song in

Sesame Street rewound at 16x speed. Dustinland's 'Theory of Hipster Relativity' on acid until it's pressure cooked: 'If you're five feet tall, someone six feet is tall, but if you're six feet, someone six feet six inches is tall'. Weirdness is a race to the top, but god forbid it's too out there.

V.

There've been times where I'll articulate certain thoughts and apologise for 'being weird', only to have the listener assure me: 'no, this is very common!' How much of weirdness is unspoken normality? That's what therapists are for.

Like depression, deviation can be incredibly average when brought to light, yet it always feels so singular: no one is a freak like me. It's a solipsistic sentiment that nudges out others in favour of the self, a me-me that threatens to sever community before it's even found.

How did it get to be this way? I scour the halls of culture and history to find kinship, a sense of being able to #relate. Poe in the poem 'Alone': 'From childhood's hour I have not been / As others were – I have not seen / As others saw – I could not bring / My passions from a common spring'; Yoko Ono; Matilda Wormwood; when Mona loses her mind in the French countryside in Agnès Varda's *Vagabond*; when punk icon Poly Styrene (RIP) says, 'I've always been an observer, not a suffering artist writing from tortured experiences. I was playing with words and ideas. Having a laugh about everything, sending it up'. Shared weirdness recast as normal.

Normal is a spectre that haunts and dominates, yet some will want to shake off what might feel like a second skin. And

weirdness is, naturally (or weirdly) its mirror image. Belonging and unbelonging as a multi-pronged mask, its spikes squaring off one another.

SPEED TESTS

Listen to this story. Within moments of joining Swedish thinktank Piratbyrå, anakata had formed a clear vision for the group. BitTorrent, a communication protocol, had been designed in the United States two years prior, and interest in its peer-to-peer (P2P) distribution capabilities was rising. Unlike more rudimentary P2P services, it has the ability to transmit large files. When he floated the idea of building a BitTorrent tracker,* some of the more vocal members expressed their enthusiasm; the group was already hosting humour sites, image-hosting portals ... why not another website? This was especially crucial following the rise of copyright lobby group Antipiratbyrå, whose activities, as one can probably gather

* A BitTorrent tracker is a special type of server which keeps track of where copies of files exist on peer machines. It also sorts out the files which are available upon client request and helps coordinate efficient transmission and reassembly of the copied file, providing network performance statistics.

by its name, were rooted in spreading anti-piracy propaganda: that ‘intellectual property’ was a good, that jobs were being stolen, that piracy was killing creativity. This ran counter to Piratbyrån’s primary purpose, which was to promote the sharing of information.

‘I was really interested in the technology,’ anakata later said. ‘And I had a spare computer in an office in Mexico where I was working at the time. I ran out to get some extra memory, then we installed a BitTorrent software and started to experiment.’

That was the easy part. On 10 August 2003, The Pirate Bay was born. Word of its existence travelled quickly, and in the space of a few months anakata’s server was buckling under the pressure, not having the bandwidth to host that much traffic. Uncertain, he called fellow Piratbyrån member and friend TiAMO back in Sweden, hoping for some kind of alternative – otherwise the site would have to be shut down. And they were only just getting started. Already, he was getting messages of gratitude* from unknowns around Sweden praising him for his ingenuity and daredevilry. A kid in Uppsala was especially pleased about their free copy of *Call of Duty*. A woman from Malmö was sending him love notes. Him! Just another dweeb obsessed with computers. It was as if he had become popular overnight.

TiAMO responded by saying he had a Pentium III 1 GHz laptop lying around. It had a glorious 256MB of RAM, which made it an obvious contender. No further thought needed to be given: The Pirate Bay was going full speed ahead. As a bonus, TiAMO added an updated tracker.

* I’m just assuming. There are no records of this.

The popularity of the site exceeded the collective's expectations, with usage expanding not just throughout Northern Europe, but worldwide. Although the rest of Piratbyrå had, for reasons unclear, distanced themselves from the project merely a year after it was launched, the tracker was coordinating a million peers and over 60000 torrent files. Despite the paucity of the group's numbers, anakata and TiAMO powered on, creating their own internet service provider to house what they had begun to acronymise as 'TPB'. In particular, they placed an emphasis on the ISP as a safe space* to host any kind of content, 'no questions asked'.

By December 2004, over 80 per cent of The Pirate Bay's users came from other parts of the world. To keep up with downloads of Jay Chou's «七里香» and Nollywood drama film *The Mayors*, as well as (of course) *Shrek 2* and *The Passion of the Christ*, the duo embarked on an extensive site overhaul, and The Pirate Bay was available in several languages by July 2005. In an interview with *Adbusters*, anakata and TiAMO outlined the artistic vision for the site: 'TPB is not just a website. TPB is not just a file-sharing network. TPB is not just a movement. TPB is also art. TPB is a performance. It's a long-running art project. Very long.' This occurred around the same time they were raising money to organise a bus to drive themselves from Sweden to Bolzano, Italy, where they were to participate in an event called Manifesta, a roving biennial exhibition of contemporary art. Their plan was to spread the good word, of what was now starting to be referred to as 'The Bay' by festival

* This is where it gets murky. What constitutes a 'safe space' (and consequently, 'freedom of speech') when maintained at the expense of others' safety? The ISP has been criticised for hosting paedophilic websites as well as a French far-right blog.

attendees (made up of a combination of well-heeled art buyers, activists, art school kids and institutional backers alike), then leave the bus there.*

By the end of 2005, The Pirate Bay was tracking 2 500 000 peers to the site. But the increased visibility contained a trade-off: it meant that they were no longer underground. Authorities in Sweden and the United States in particular were keeping close tabs. In 2009, the Motion Picture Association of America accused them of ‘assisting in duplicating copyrighted content’. Other letters soon arrived. But the duo sent each institution a mocking response in return, each member taking turns to send back something equally rude and passive-aggressive. TiAMO and anakata began posting their cease-and-desist letters online alongside their flippant replies. ‘Please don’t sue us right now, our lawyer is passed out in an alley,’ one said. To Sega, someone wrote: ‘I would advise you to not write the subject all in UPPERCASE, as it makes spam filters go nuts.’

Days later, on a drunken walk home one night, anakata kept sensing footsteps behind him as he stumbled from the local pub, as he took a roundabout route due to his inebriated disorientation, as he fell next to a tree to take a piss. *ABCK IT PU*. A quick text to TiAMO, who read the message as code. He did so accordingly, assuming anakata had received a tip-off. Two weeks later, the site experienced three days of downtime as Stockholm police raided a data centre and confiscated all their servers.

* The confluence of art, institutional backing and the interest in power consolidation becomes more apparent when projects that begin with utopian political intentions emerge from the underground. I don’t know what The Pirate Bay did with the bus, but I’m imagining this as a prank they would play to drum up more hype.

Around that time, anakata wrote in his diary:*

Things are coming hard and fast. Since that night at the bar, people have been following my tracks with every turn. It doesn't feel so much like a joke anymore, or even an experiment. I'm proud of what we have done and the people we have reached. WE ARE A PHENOMENON! But I don't know what else will happen.

At the time, Sweden had already been receiving pressure from the United States government to press charges. This development also led to many of The Pirate Bay's team from their Piratbyrå days completely cutting ties with the project, leaving anakata, TiAMO and brokep, another remaining Piratbyrå member, to deal with the fallout.

The backup proved to be prescient; the site returned online completely unscathed. The only new addition was an updated logo featuring the collective's now-legendary pirate ship emblem firing cannonballs at the Hollywood sign. The Pirate Bay had an estimated 22 million users by this point. The trio would continue receiving emails expressing support and disdain in equal measure. Years later, brokep told press that he never thought they'd be convicted.

As one would expect, global authorities were hell-bent on putting an end to the community that the BitTorrent site had amassed both painstakingly and seemingly out of thin air. By then, the trio was beginning to receive a torrent of court notices, all of which were only increasing by the day. What made this even more murky was the discovery that Carl Lundström, a Swedish businessman with connections to far-right groups, had been

* This is a figment of my imagination.

providing services and equipment from his telecommunications company to the project in the background, with tabloids referring to him as ‘The Pirate Bay’s neo-Nazi sugar daddy’.

The trio remained cavalier* through it all – the site stayed online; even more supporters emerged. On Vimeo, TiAMO uploaded a short time-lapse video showing how quickly files were being shared on the platform in real time† – users with Russian, Thai and Italian IP addresses were seeding porn, e-books, movies and music as much as they were downloading them. The charges may as well have been free publicity.

By now, especially as the February 2009 court date loomed, it seemed as if the entire world was watching: governments, fans, copycats and detractors alike. It didn’t matter if people wanted them to leave behind a legacy or go down like a sinking ship – the entire debacle was a great spectacle in itself. Online, op-eds speculated that it was all a ruse, a publicity stunt for a reality TV show in the making. Offline, seats to the trial at a Stockholm district court were being sold for up to \$90 a day.‡

When the date of the trial arrived, however, the trio threw another curveball, claiming that they had already sold The

* For all their purported left-wing ideals, it sure didn’t seem to bother them where the money was coming from. Some reports have accused them of keeping up a ‘non-profit’ facade, and Lundström himself was reported to say, ‘There’s around 30 000 to 40 000 SEK flowing in per month. The cost of internet lines, server hosting etc is less, so they are doing well financially.’ It’s impossible to know who is telling the truth.

† There are no records of this either. However, it was around this time that global attention on them was at its peak.

‡ You’d think I made this up, but no!

Pirate Bay off to an alleged non-profit in the Seychelles.* The island-nation and offshore tax haven was their second option, after an unsuccessful bid at buying sovereign micronation Sealand, which would have been the ideal undisputed haven for their servers. Supporters turned up outside the courts waving black skull-and-crossbones flags, while others dressed in elaborate steampunk costumes served ‘creative cookies’ – baked in the shape of the copyleft symbol – to the crowds.

On day two of the trial, brokep continued to dismiss the allegations as ‘bizarre’, comparing their treatment to that of Daniel in *The Karate Kid*: ‘In the beginning there are these bullies, that bully Johnny ... And then he gets beaten up and that’s where we’re at.’

The trial took a total of six days to conclude. The verdict? \$3.5 million in fines and damages, with anakata, TiAMO and brokep all sentenced to a year each in jail.† Unsurprisingly, Lundström got off scot-free. At a press conference afterwards,

* During the trial, The Pirate Bay’s lawyer confirmed that anakata, TiAMO and brokep no longer held ownership of the site. But there was no evidence that the site had been sold either: no contract, no bank transfer, nothing. In 2009, Dutch anti-piracy group BREIN traced its ownership to anakata. It wasn’t long until brokep took to his blog to declare a forgery, then proceeded to press criminal charges against head of BREIN, Tim Kuik.

† The trio continued to appeal the case, alleging bias on the part of the judge. The case dragged on till 21 May 2010, where the Svea Court of Appeal decided not to change the orders on anakata, TiAMO, or brokep. They pressed on for another two years, but the Supreme Court of Sweden refused to hear another appeal and upheld their original sentences. A few months later, anakata was arrested in Phnom Penh (where he fled, and where he had an international warrant placed on him after not serving his sentence). He would continue to crack jokes on Twitter while in jail. The others were arrested in their respective hide-outs shortly after. Since their release, they have all remained low-key, insisting they no longer have any connection with The Pirate Bay.

TiAMO was adamant that they would not pay; instead, he wrote on a piece of paper in thick black marker: I OWE U 31 000 000 SEK. ‘That’s as close as you’re going to get,’ he declared.

As of this writing – sixteen years since the 128 MB computer hummed noisily in anakata’s Mexican office – The Pirate Bay is still online.* Its files now exist in various clouds, off some code that’s been wrapped up and put online for anyone to copy and install on their servers, run by anonymous moderators in unknown, scattered locations. Up to thirty proxy sites† exist, should one need to bypass internet service providers. Like a body blockade, there is no one node. Whack a mole and another one grows.



March 2004, Singapore

I’m sitting in front of a fat desktop PC, my grinning face thrown brightly into contrast by the white fluorescent light above. The Compaq screen further amplifies this, turning my face into a blurry white spot lit up by the flash of the disposable camera.

* There have been a few more crackdowns by authorities on the site, including a shutdown in December 2014, with brokep responding in a blog post that he was happy to see it happen, as he felt that his successors ‘had done nothing to improve the site’ and that the site was ‘ugly’ and ‘full of bugs’. In 2018 and subsequently in 2020, TPB users frequently came up against Error 522, but the cause has been undetermined. Many proxy sites still exist.

† It’s worth noting here that The Pirate Bay has inspired the existence of other torrent sites outside of these proxies. At the time of writing, kat.rip, Demonoid and x1337X remain active.

I've successfully downloaded Limewire, and the photo exists to document this moment.

I was crowing something about the wide variety of Winamp skins; all that range seemed useless to me in a world of only Kazaa, where the number of seeders was dwindling, likely due to creators' attempts at converting users into paying customers. Napster had been forced to shut down four years prior. Left in its wake was a growing worry that the file-sharing application was irreplaceable. The first thing I decide to download on Limewire is the song 'Freak on a Leash' by Korn. I'd recently discovered music that wasn't readily heard on the radio airwaves – what a few regulars had started to refer to as 'noisy' music.

On the cybercafe's public network, speed tests run high and stay consistent. Under the weight of the 50-odd Alienware PCs all possibly running at the same time, the broadband connection serves to undergird the grid. If a connection drops out, it's immediately audible in the form of a curse. Lives are at stake. It helps that we're in Singapore, a country which has literally won the global internet speed race. The nation-state also holds the rank for hosting the world's largest game of musical chairs.*

My shift typically runs for twelve hours, six days a week. Between going on WoW raids and languidly starting DoTA games with customers to keep them there, I have various activities running in the background. Forum chats. Unfinished blog posts. Entire albums leeches then seeded. The adage goes: take only what you need, then share. I feel like Robin Hood. Or the Pied Piper, depending on how you're looking at it. Newly

* Other accolades include: World's Best Airport, Most People Applying False Eyelashes, Largest Reunion of People Born at the Same Hospital, Most People Wearing Balloon Hats (of which Tony Abbott was a part), among others.

energised off my findings, I start another blog specifically to archive obscure nu-metal, songs painstakingly found then compiled into a .zip file, complete with album artwork. These are all facilitated by single YouSendIt and Megaupload* links, each one logged into a separate page that doubles as an index. Occasionally, there's a lyric sheet, put together with 'The Heretic Anthem' pumping in the background – *If you're 555, then I'm 666! What's it like to be a heretic?*



absolute noob here. how safe are keygens? never ran one before

as safe as not wearing a condom ...

... haha but seriously test it on a second machine first

how to tell the diff between real and fakes?

depends, run it in [REDACTED], use an antivirus first

out of 200 times I used them there was only a worm once or twice, easy to delete but gotta be careful cos they will damage files while deleting

* RIP 2005–2012. At the time of writing, the charges against Megaupload founder Kim Dotcom rage on, with no end to the legal battle in sight.

set sail my friend

thanks, I'll be back if I need more help

pleasure! good luck



‘This book is impossible to read. The file is corrupted and all kinds of strange characters obscure words. One of the gems is “feces” for “faces”.’

Amazon book review for a pirated copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

When cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han coined the term ‘hyperspace’, he was simply observing the contemporary collapse of what had been previously known as ‘cyberspace’, the axes of globalisation and the acceleration of digital networks converging like cascading windows gone rogue. It is, according to him, a ‘completely hybrid and promiscuous space’ where ‘everything is intermingled and networked with everything else, a space where cultural and territorial markers have been deleted, a space marked by a lack of distance’. In *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, he ruminates on how the Chinese cultural phenomenon of shanzhai – essentially, ‘fakes’, but more widely understood as a kind of bootlegging – takes on the character of hyperspace to envision more possibilities. Initially a term used to describe cellphone knock-offs with names such as Nokir, iPncne and

Samsing, it's now grown to occupy the popular imagination to mean any kind of cultural product that's adaptable and 'fully exploits the situation's potential'.

Shanzhai has no limits. If something can be copied, then it will be. There are shanzhai Harry Potter books, a shanzhai Nobel Prize, shanzhai politicians, shanzhai celebrities, shanzhai electric cars.* And though they're technically forgeries, it doesn't mean that the result is inferior – in fact, most of the time the copy is superior and even more slick. At its core, shanzhai doesn't only bring about creativity of the highest order, it also serves to shift positions of economic power, an attempt at toppling monopolies. It is the equivalent of throwing the first brick. When Adidas becomes Dasida, for example, or when a shanzhai mobile phone is installed with a function that can identify counterfeit currency, according to Han 'a truly Dadaist game is being played'. Shanzhai is subversion through closeness, a form of trolling that arises out of familiarity, not the product of a lone genius but an affective endeavour by a collective rhizome. As in fan fiction, dominant narratives are taken and re-appropriated. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Porcelain Doll*, Harry defeats his adversary Yandomort on the sacred mountain of Taishan together with his friends Long and Xing.

In Indonesia, shanzhai manifests itself in different ways, but its motivations are the same. What immediately comes to mind is how the British political grindcore band Napalm Death became widely known almost overnight, providing a backbone for the creation of an Indonesian heavy metal underground that has now fanned out to involve various sub-genres. Today, some Indonesian noise music incorporates dangdut and gamelan.

* Another example of shanzhai is a phone advertisement for a Blackberry phone with an image of Barack Obama as its 'spokesman'.

Others, such as experimental electronic outfit Gabber Modus Operandi, mash together punk, metal, gabber and kecak to engineer a rogue futurism. The band's singer, Ican Harem, also runs a fashion label made out of entirely upcycled clothes – imagine a Monster Energy dri-fit tee artfully cut up and conjoined with a KISS long-sleeve shirt to form an entirely new garment. When asked, he says their activities are a reaction that has come from 'digging through our identity as millennial Indonesians in transition to digital culture'. All of this can arguably be traced back to KG-1060891, that first bootleg cassette of Napalm Death's *Harmony Corruption*, a number that many local metalheads can recite by heart.

The idea of 'intellectual property' is a curious relic of the western world, a world that, despite its outdated notions, still continues to thrive – this position of wanting to own things is precisely what's resulted in colonialism reigning in the first place. It wasn't until 1967 that the WIPO Convention* treaty was passed, with article 2(viii) defining intellectual property to include literature, art, scientific discoveries, performances, broadcasts, 'protection against unfair competition' and finally, 'all other rights resulting from intellectual property activity in the industrial, scientific, literary or artistic fields'. When intellectual property is given polemical and rhetorical value, it's easy to cement wealth and power by asserting arbitrary 'rights' that see ownership as morally defensible; anything else becomes theft.

The Pirate Bay took it a step further when they launched 'Physibles' in 2012, an arm designed for sharing 3D printables. Now, eleven years later, there are many more open-source

* Formally, they are referred to as the Convention Establishing the World Intellectual Property Organisation. Bit of a mouthful, I suppose.

platforms and file-sharing websites that facilitate the printing of objects – Bulbasaur planters, violins, bicycles, and even guns – should one bother to educate oneself with the know-how and wherewithal to find and assemble them. Not unlike the community of marauders the BitTorrent website had gathered from scratch, Physibles was yet another indicator that there was no end point to the sharing of information, especially when it was not kept guarded behind draconian laws. One need not feel obliged to seed after leeching, yet most do – otherwise no files would exist in the first place. In other words, ‘it’s like internet karma that works’ (Redditors) or the ‘warm glow/cold prickle’ theory which demonstrates that a large fraction of people generally tend to voluntarily contribute to public goods even if the incentive to free-load is strong (economists). When the mindset that acts as a shroud around intellectual property is given up altogether, it becomes clear that knowledge and creative works are actually non-rivalrous and non-depletable, a lovely wellspring that doesn’t stop giving.

As Han writes, ‘shanzhai is decreation.’ If intermediaries – and consequently, layers of power – are eliminated, the idealised version of Do-It-Yourself culture emerges. No more shipping huge amounts of products around the world.* No more shipping the broken products back. No more sweatshop labour. Perhaps a pipe dream, but shanzhai allows for the possibility of dreaming.

* In an ideal world of shanzhai, hyperlocal markets would spring up around the world of their own accord, much like in China. In so-called ‘post’-pandemic times, we are seeing many more examples of these around the world.



June 2007, Bangkok, Thailand

The first time I went overseas was a celebratory event. For reasons unrelated to this essay, I hadn't been on a plane until then. Two gal pals I had gotten acquainted with from the DIY-punk underground asked if I wanted to come along on a short trip to Thailand – a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Singapore.

Going through the motions of getting my shit together wasn't totally arduous. Passports at the time cost \$50 a pop, and budget airlines were newly booming, advertising slogans such as 'Now Everyone Can Fly'. To some extent, this was true: I had often heard of people who would 'just go' to Hanoi or Bali for a weekend jaunt, as if borders were arbitrary.

For certain groups of people, borders were certainly not impenetrable. This was especially so in the 'hub' we lived in, which often sold the promise that we were citizens of the world regardless of class. I'd dream of becoming one of these people, the world atlas no longer a huge, unfamiliar fiction but an unlimited expanse that was open to discovery.

That year, I took a weekend off from the cybercafe, two hundred dollars in my pocket and a 5kg backpack in tow. The plane journey was uneventful, and if I hadn't stayed awake the whole time trying to sense a metaphysical shift, I'd simply have woken up in a place which merely operated on a slightly different timezone and where people used a different script to write in, a different language to speak in.

In any case, as I got used to magically appearing in a place that wasn't the country I was born and raised in, the luxury of

travel was emboldening. It helped that each of my Singapore dollars was equal to twenty-three baht, we were crashing with friends we had met on the internet, and that locals looked at our faces and demeanours and saw the symbolic glamour of the Lion City made flesh. We slept in an upstairs room of our friend June's family home, ensconced in the warm embrace of the scorching Thai heat and the international punk network. Drinking iced teas till the sun came up on our first night, we didn't want to waste any time: we talked about CrimethInc. books, veganism, and the possibility of train-hopping in Southeast Asia. The subculture always proselytised 'no borders' – in our minds we wanted to smash them. At the time, we weren't aware that our purported radicalism was shaped by North American hegemony; the rulebook was completely theirs. But we didn't think there were any rules.

June also loved the films of Wim Wenders. I had not heard of the director before, my movie knowledge limited to what was usually on TV, and which I was gradually drifting away from. I despised my emotionally abusive, overworked parents, and consequently abhorred their television habits. This was propped up further by my fervent belief in punk, whose many tenets – at least in the late 2000s – often espoused that television would rot your brain from the inside out. In Bangkok, I wore my bootlegged screenprinted KILL YOUR TV t-shirt with pride, the slogan probably borrowed from the Ned's Atomic Dustbin song of the same name. But I hadn't watched any arthouse films because I didn't know they even existed in the first place.

June snickered when she quizzed us and none of us had heard of Jean-Luc Godard or Ingmar Bergman. I resented her for knowing more than me. We were punks, after all. At her lead, we got on a tuk-tuk to a suburban locale on our last night to arrive at an open-air market that was identified by its makeshift

tentage, with vendors selling their wares on a piece of flattened cardboard laid on the concrete ground. Most of the DVDs were porn, while others were CDs that contained bootlegs of licensed computer software, but we had turned up in arthouse wonderland. Every third stall had a pirated copy of *Dogville*, each cover modified according to the seller's whim – Nicole Kidman's mug photocopied in a lurid cyan, the title in various fonts. I saw the word 'DOG' again and again until it made no sense.

'You have to watch this one. And this'. Shoved into my hands were Godard's *Alphaville*, Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, Wrath of God* and Wenders' *Alice in the Cities*. Doors were opening, but they were also closing in on me.* Still, I had stepped into a new room.



'Focus is identified as a class position, a position of ease and privilege, while being out of focus lowers one's value as an image.'

Hito Steyerl

Around 2007, Google launched a digital fingerprinting system to easily identify and manage copyrighted content on YouTube. Videos uploaded to the platform are compared against audio and video files registered with this system by content owners –

* I would stop watching TV altogether, filling my life with films that didn't necessarily make sense to me, especially as I blindly jumped into them without any foundational understanding of the genre(s). Now, I have large gaps in my knowledge when it comes to screen media.

its aim was to look for unauthorised matches that were possibly floating around on the site and block them (or in some cases, at the owner's discretion, monetise them). To circumvent this, an anonymous pirate began to create videos that featured a cat watching an old JVC television set. This TV screen could be playing *Moulin Rouge* or episodes of *Sesame Street* and go undetected. While this was probably useless to cinephiles seeking a watchable copy of a rare film, the proliferation of these types of videos was confusing to the system. What was playing on the TV screen-on-the-screen could be a copy of a popular movie, but the system only saw a cat watching TV. Still, it was impossible for the artificially intelligent system to root out all instances of so-called piracy; rare films can be watched on the site today, albeit in low resolution. It's common for some to disappear after a month, to reappear a few months later.* Rinse, lather, repeat, whack-a-mole.

Similarly, pirated Kodi boxes[†] play on this ethos, of which there are over a million in the world at the time of writing. Devised as a free, open-source media player software that allows users to view most online streaming media, its unlocked nature has enabled the existence of 'fully-loaded' boxes that come with third-party add-ons that help with accessing so-called copyrighted content. There are so many of these modified boxes floating around that some people have unwittingly associated them with the company. And while Amazon has pulled the box off its store and Google has removed the word 'Kodi' from autocomplete search queries, customised Kodis abound unrestricted.

* This is especially so for films and documentaries that are considered politically controversial or banned by governments.

† There are now more sophisticated and user-friendly versions of this model. Plex and Stremio are two examples.

In South Korea, less is even more, as external devices are made completely unnecessary. Much like the Megauploads and Rapidshares of yore, a substantial part of online piracy takes place via what is referred to as ‘webhards’, a type of local file-sharing site disguised to look like a typical login page. After paying a small fee to receive a password, its insides open up to reveal unlimited content. Everything is for sale and nothing is licensed. Each member is allowed to have up to 1TB of storage. On a webhard, an .avi of *Old Boy* could be the 900th copy, yet its quality is crystal clear.

When I was searching for a copy of Marguerite Duras’ novella *The Lover*, it was in a similar way. Log on to the now-seldom used mIRC software, find a chat room, and e-books are abundant. Elsewhere, GitHub domains are filled with manga; other sites with academic books and papers typically locked behind expensive paywalls. The only time I was able to access Sylvia Wynter’s *On Being Human as Praxis* was through a complete stranger on a Facebook group.*

Many reports say that piracy is on the decline as streaming giants dominate and redefine mainstream possibilities of media. It’s convenient when everything is in one place. Yet other studies say that piracy is increasing, with television the most sought-after content, followed by music and film. While the dominance of streaming services today leads to questions such as ‘Where is it on?’ when recommended a film or TV show, the grey market teems with anything you could possibly want. You wanna watch *Princess Mononoke* right now? You got it. The pirate ship appears to be sinking, but the seas are only getting wider, and its holes are leaking shit.

* Much of my theoretical knowledge comes from books downloaded off Libgen and Monoskop.



In December 2018, new music from Beyoncé and SZA dropped on Spotify and Apple Music. Yet what was strange about this event was that there had been no preceding anticipation. Released under the names ‘Queen Carter’ and ‘Sister Solana’ respectively, it seemed initially like a sneaky, unpublicised Easter egg to drum up hype. But the songs sounded unpolished, and some die-hard fans recognised the Beyoncé ones from old recording sessions.

As news of this circulated, it soon became apparent that the tracks had been fraudulently uploaded onto the audio streaming platforms. Three months later, a fake Rihanna album followed suit. Titled *Angel* and distributed under the moniker ‘Fenty Fantasia’ on iTunes, with tracks such as ‘Counterfeit’ and ‘Bitch I’m Special’, fewer people cottoned on to it than they did the Beyoncé and SZA fakes – it climbed up to #67 on the iTunes worldwide album charts before being detected and removed. When asked by a fan via DM on Instagram (‘What’s with this mess Rih? Get their ass to jail ASAP’) she merely shrugged. ‘Shit’s crazy,’ she replied.

In a bid to game the notoriously vetted music streaming app, which leans on a purported ‘free-for-all’ music library that then sells its information about its users, pirates are not only using the above tactics to cash in, but to stretch the limits of how far hoaxes can run before they’re exposed. A particularly ingenious example comes from funk band Vulfpeck, who put out a silent album titled *Sleepify* in 2014, asking fans to play the roughly five-minute album on loop while they slept. They were hoping to use the money earned to go on tour. Fans complied, and the

gambit went on to accrue \$20 000 in royalties until Spotify took the album down. The band never saw their money.

Perhaps Vulfpeck would have done better to not have made their scam known in the first place. Funnily enough, John Cage's similarly silent *4:33* continues to stream on Spotify unrestricted.* In a much cleverer twist, an anonymous Bulgarian collective earned a cool million from the same platform by uploading several third-party playlists of their own songs, creating a flurry of fake accounts to boost their play counts. Unlike Vulfpeck, they managed to reap the cash rewards.

Jenny Odell writes in *How To Do Nothing* that our 'margins of refusal' are shrinking, especially as corporate monopolies become omnipresent and insidious, leading to a sense of choicelessness. If it seems more convenient to watch a film on a video-on-demand service than it is to acquire and learn how to use a virtual private network (VPN), then why would I go the extra mile? If being more informed about algorithmic power involves taking the time to get past technical jargon and then promptly quitting certain services that play into this power – sometimes even having to join an entirely new social network – why would I risk losing everything just to start over? In a world that increasingly gives precedence to the atomisation of selves, intimacy and connection increasingly hinge on corporate terms – when the channels of connection are controlled and profitable, the threat of isolation looms over the landscape.



* Art, but make it legit!

pondering how to get up, so you download a pirate copy
instead—@botaleptic

half the sockets don't work, so you download a pirate copy
instead—@botaleptic

a copy of the most remarkable things I ever saw—
@botaleptic

a copy of minima moralia—@botaleptic

... in the antagonistic society, the relationship of the
generations is also one of competition, behind which
stands naked violence.

Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

The next day I go back to being completely anonymous. I put on a light grey t-shirt, blue jeans, a maroon jumper, no makeup, my hair tightly combed and tied in a loose ponytail. A coffee on the stove, no ice, unsweetened, no milk. I pour out a small bowl of rolled oats, then add in a few splashes of tap water. Munch munch munch then wash it down with more water. I turn on my laptop, feeling moderately optimistic; didn't Sun Tzu say something about controversy being the last resort of the talentless? Or was it 'all warfare is based on deception'?

A flurry of deactivated accounts: each one a chore to navigate, each one repeatedly throwing me through hoops as they ask, repeatedly: *ARE YOU SURE?* I scratch an itch on my neck, pause to look at the clock above me. My pal Sam__ Handwich6969 in another window egging me on. *Cut off the*

nodes, it takes some getting used to but I promise you'll stop feeling it. Asceticism.

The lure of total communion snakes around me like a boa constrictor about to get fresh. I open and close my laptop multiple times. I don't stop seeding or leeching, log off my chat with Sam. Each move I make I'm striking a deal with the villain.

THE LIFESTYLE CHURCH

There is always a 'before' and 'after' once you begin.

It was six years into the new millennium. The end of the world did not end up happening. A massive global financial crash was looming. I was looking for something but didn't know what. At the cybercafe I worked at, the answer gradually made itself clear, floated in my direction somehow.

'We should meet,' my LiveJournal friend said. I had been friends with Christine since 2004, and she had interests I considered noteworthy. They seemed mysterious and worldly. I had joined the goth and extreme music communities she was in but I wanted to know more.

People like us experienced a kind of hyperinvisibility, where you can stand out in a crowd and yet also be treated as if you don't exist. The whole idea, in this climate, was to make yourself seen when you previously were *and* weren't. It was a kind of fuck you to the society we found ourselves born within, one we gradually grew to realise prided itself on manufacturing drones. It was simply how the state ran itself, its statecraft whittled down to a distinct, inviolable precision. In this climate no one was allowed to be truly critical; it was often encouraged that the status quo went unquestioned. The state owns the entire media! There is no independent judiciary! It was common knowledge that the more you looked the other way, played by the rules, the higher you'll ascend. But the yardsticks also always seemed to be changing, at least from observing the way my parents seemed to keep failing, even more shocking when days before you thought they were winning. Nothing was good. It was beginning to dawn on me that I had been brought up in a society that was run like a corporation. At the time it was just a teenage inkling, although it would prove to be accurate years later.

Christine suggested meeting up at a gig around the central part of town. A beat. 'Because someone I'm dating is playing.'

'What do I wear?'

‘Anything you want.’

I ended up in jeans and a t-shirt. Something with a distorted scribble print that looked like a child had gone over a painting with coloured pencils. When we got there, Christine was only one amongst a small handful of people who was dressed in a big way. She introduced me to the person she came to see, said his name was Navin.

When J.M. Bernstein wrote about ‘life-styles’ in Theodor Adorno’s posthumous banger *The Culture Industry*, he couldn’t possibly have predicted the specific forms they would assume more than three decades later. Adorno himself, who was so fixated with the culture industry – the production of culture at industrial scale, what he asserts as something that ‘perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises’ – that he wrote scores of literature on the subject throughout the course of his lifetime, could only condemn it more and more vehemently as well; there were few directives on how it could be contained, or solved.

Adorno would keep writing about the culture industry, and his work would continue to get translated and published long after his death in 1969. In what would become the latest iteration, from the 2023 translated collection *Without Model*, he offers a striking provocation beyond the grave: ‘What presents itself as progress in the culture industry, the constant novelty it offers, remains the outer shell of the ever-same; every instance of variety conceals a skeleton that changes as little as the profit motive itself has changed since gaining dominance over culture.’

The band sang songs about revolution. ‘There’s a fight to be fought; we’ll find the strength somehow,’ one of them went. It was called ‘Spirit’. Navin had the manner of a youth leader. Warm, charismatic, knowledgeable. It felt like I could ask him anything and he’d tell me the answer. He invited me to join him and Christine for dinner afterwards; his bandmates were also coming. They were similar in demeanour, except much more reserved. Navin seemed to wield some authority over them. They were rapt every time he shared his political theories. I wasn’t sure how I felt, to suddenly be amongst a communal experience. Was this ... friendship? Could it be one? That afternoon was life-changing.

‘It’s the closest experience I have to sports or church.’

Brooke Smith, *Sunday Matinee*

‘Conversion stories about rock and particularly its most fanatic sect, “punk”, eerily resemble born-again stories of being “saved”. [...] The Reformation in rock would be “punk”, which in turn spawned a thousand sects, each one announcing its claim as the bearer of the true flame.’

Ian F. Svenonius, *The Psychic Soviet*

‘Punk was an incredibly important formative influence in my life because it was my first activist community, where my politics grew up. I still like some of the music and see having come up in that scene as an integral part of who I am. But it shouldn’t surprise anybody that I grew out of and grew alienated by the punk scene, then submitted to a punk zine to talk shit about it.’

Nia King, *‘The First 7-Inch Was Better’:
How I Became an Ex-Punk*

We became friends very quickly. They were always wanting to show me things. We talked on the phone a lot. Just testing out thoughts and ideas, having little debates. Through Navin I came across a zine titled *Against Prisons*, and while I didn't understand why my father was in prison I at least had language against incarceration. Evidently I was too early to some of these ideas – it took me several more years and many more readings before I fully understood it.

Coming across these ways of thinking contained an air of loftiness – they seemed so secret, so wrong, so immoral. Our society had (has) yet to abolish the death penalty. It was illegal for queer people to have sex with each other. We were (are) not allowed to protest. There were (are) no trade unions independent of government. Bloggers were (are) taken to court for sedition. I'd managed to read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* through another online friend who gave me her copy of the Orwell novel she had studied in her final year of junior college. It was crazy to feel like we were living in Winston's world, but the more I read* the more this theory proved itself increasingly possible.

It really was so overwhelming. To bear all that new knowledge, and then not feel like you were able to disseminate it further, because technically that was against the law? Only the state could print on news print, because that was a symbol that represented the official source of knowledge. The state owned (owns) nearly everything. Taking your own life was considered a crime. We couldn't replicate the news print fanzines we loved so much from the USA, how they'd crinkle in our hands as we

* I ended up reading most of the titles on the 'List of Dystopian Literature' Wikipedia page. According to the state's logic, ordinary people don't read books about politics, but they do watch films. I was able to access many books at the library in this way.

turned the page, become yellow with age. The fact that we knew this was against the rules only terrified and motivated us further. Freud might call it the death drive. I couldn't unlearn what I had already learned, yet I was also trying to unlearn what I had previously learned.

Thinking about lifestyles in our concentrated present, the memefied ‘starter pack’ comes to mind. Its genesis: a curated form of ‘taste’, where one defines themselves by what they choose to consume, further intensified in the social media era. A more outdated phrase might be ‘personal brand’, which gives you a hint as to how quickly the culture industry moves. Lifestyle today is an aesthetic, an identity, a vibe. It is the ‘Lifestyles’ section in newspapers and magazines, exploded. It sends up images of summer holidays in Europe, glasses of orange wine next to plates of oysters on a flatlay; stacks of books that include Marx’s *Capital* and Bruce Pascoe’s *Dark Emu*; A24 tote bags styled with ironic varsity t-shirt Nike TNs and straight-leg linen pants; selfies with death metal t-shirt and can of Monster energy drink in hand. Carly Rae Jepsen t-shirts with the pop singer’s name in a metal font. A long-sleeve t-shirt with the original cover of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* tastefully re-adapted on its front. A cap that simply reads ‘RACHEL CUSK’, ‘TAHINI’ or ‘SHE’LL BE RIGHT’. A tote bag that proclaims ‘Never Trust a Cop’. Lifestyle in these times can be considered a kind of ‘junkspace’, neoliberal detritus, what Rem Koolhaas defines as ‘a fuzzy empire of blur, it fuses high and low, public and private, straight and bent, bloated and starved to offer a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed.’

It’s not meant to make sense. It’s the logical conclusion of capitalist excess, where even invoking the word ‘capitalism’ allows others to get a sense of ‘who’ you are. We are slotted into particular genres as items would be in a supermarket or bookstore. Well lemme tell you this could be autobiography! If ‘life style’, ‘lifestyle’ or ‘styles of life’ (which do you prefer?) once referred to one’s living conditions, memories, thoughts and behaviours *or* consumer taste, they have now agglomerated.

Images – via all of the above – have been disseminated so rapidly that they have evolved into true and self-sustaining commodities. The vibe is of Adam Curtis’s films, on fast forward.

The other thing that made hanging out with the trio even more fun was the gigs. It had been a few years into our friendship and Christine had already hung up her boots, telling me one day that she'd have to assimilate into the regular world now, be a 'good girl' and all that. Why would you do that? It was so much fun here where we were.

One gig is particularly memorable. 2008? A band from the United States was touring the region, and this was one of the shows on their tour. When I met up with the trio at the train station and walked to the venue I was trying to hide my surprise that it was located in an industrial area, in a part of the city-state only they had been to. Inside, there was a makeshift stage built from timber off-cuts, raised about two inches above the ground. The room itself wasn't very big, maybe 70 people at most. When we were shoulder to shoulder sweat pouring out of every pore it could probably fit 150. There were zines and records laid out for sale on the ground outside the venue, distros selling their wares. For a few hours, the scene contained a roomful of sweaty misfits, all literally dancing to the beat of their own drum, even if ventilation was scarce. The music poured out, raging and bleak, and the binary between 'fan' and 'idol' dissolved.

Joy James talks about the ‘agape’ when it comes to revolutionary love, in how it’s ‘not a narcotic’, but a journey; ‘a form of love but it’s not the love of the marketplace’. Taken from ancient Greek, ‘agape’ is a Christian theological concept referring to the highest form of love and affection, but distinct from ‘philia’, self-love. Perhaps we have to be consumed by fervour in order to act accordingly. A kind of devotion so overwhelmingly sacrificial that there is no need for reciprocity. A type of belief so all-encompassing and total that we can dedicate our entire lives in service of it.

Things I learned: critical thinking, hand-sewing my own rips, being comfortable performing on a stage, navigating cultural differences, dealing with conflict, self-publishing, consent, standing up for my rights, sharing within your means, changing my own bicycle tire, abolitionist politics, planning a timeline, organising events, making things work with little to no money.

Things I discovered: astrology, Marxism, co-ops, political science fiction, Food Not Bombs, psychedelia, 'arthouse' films, anti-zionism, drugs, abolitionist politics, cynicism, scarcity is a myth, ethical non-monogamy, self-publishing, transformative justice.

It was a protracted adolescence. I didn't want to leave. It was, per Born Against front-person Sam McPheeters in *Mutations*, 'as if the three of us were one team and society was the other team, and society, being composed of everyone, had an insurmountable advantage.' This was particularly true considering how many of us had already overcome adolescence by then, most of which was awful by many accounts. It wasn't rare that people would have a bully story, or something about a bad home life. A lot of it was self-protection. I didn't get to be a kid so I wanted to tap into it, extend the feeling for as long as possible. It was like being given a second shot, a way to find out how it'd felt for others but without any rules. The validation and affirmation it imparted were almost unbearable. It was a sense of belonging that was unparalleled.

As Suckdog accurately identifies while writing of her initial encounters with punk troubadour GG Allin in her memoir *Drugs Are Nice*, we were people who were 'needing attention yet at the same time fearing detection'. Just a bunch of people with undiagnosed post-traumatic stress syndrome schlepping around. The reverse is maybe worse. Who knows what would have happened if I hadn't found this world? I might have become a teenage mum, saddled with children I don't want, further steeped in poverty. I might have decided that I couldn't continue living a futureless life. I might not have survived.

In the extended printed conversation ‘Punk is History’, Malcolm McLaren talks about the first time he saw a teddy boy – a youth subculture in 1950s and 60s England, where young men, and later, women, dressed in Edwardian-style clothing – and how that moment made him realise that ‘fashion could make you look completely out of step with everything else that people were terming good’. This recognition helped him understand how he could ‘fit in’, which he recounts ‘was a bit like the t-shirt I created in my shop during the Sex Pistols era, with the slogan “Fuck your mother and run away”.’

McLaren was the manager of the Sex Pistols, and as we now know, orchestrated it such that the band ‘made it’, managed to make their brand of rebellion marketable. On a Reddit thread from 2016 that attempts to taxonomise bands who had ‘sold out’,* the Sex Pistols and frontman Sid Vicious are included without any comment other than ‘obviously’. Then came bands such as the New York Dolls, the Ramones, the Stooges, Misfits, the Clash. The list goes on and on. In *The Psychic Soviet*, Svenonius notes how McLaren – through his shop ‘SEX’ – ‘was attempting to make a King’s Road trend out of the fetish wear favoured by leather boys, hustlers and perverts at the time’. None of this came across as that surprising to observers then, especially as it proved more unmistakable with every evolution: after all, punk arose as a reaction against the presumed falsity of rock as a kind of corrective, but surrendered to its allure nonetheless, even if sub-genres would continue to appear, like people were trying to plug in holes, halt the leakages. Mark Fisher had

* As is to be reasonably expected for these types of conversations, which were almost always held online, it would fizzle out to nothing other than long-drawn arguments as to who needed to be on the list and why, as well as excoriating disagreements that attempted to explain why the entire concept of ‘selling out’ was false to begin with.

previously noticed two strains: ‘the rockers who appealed to the authentic and the natural’, as opposed to mods, who ‘embraced the hyperartificial’ where ‘alienation had become something of a deliberate stance’. For punk, it was a haphazard merging of the two.

Although the Do-It-Yourself underground would continue to evolve in the new millennium, the underlying character remained crystal clear. It continues to serve as a rebellious sanctuary within a small social group that’s made to feel like it’s the whole world. This became a template for everyone else that came later: generation after generation of youths, each seeking their unique form of guidance and companionship. Yet you were either in or out.

When asked about his relationship to designing and producing records through his independent record label* during a time of unprecedented mass consumption, McPheeters, in a 2010 interview in *Touchable Sound: A Collection of 7-Inch Records from the USA*, states it plainly: ‘I see now that the economy of the punk and weirdo scenes has the same dynamics of a pyramid scheme’.

I see it now too. How else to explain this peculiar internal economy where items and merchandise are handed down through successive generations? It’s an attractive premise – mesmerising, even; the consumerism inherent to the sub-culture works to build social power for those who’ve never managed to come close to having any, whether as black sheep within reputable lineages or outcasts from working-class and impoverished families who were often not made to feel included

* Vermiform Records ran from 1990 to 2002, and were responsible for releasing classics such as Man is the Bastard’s *Sum of the Men: “The Brutality Continues...”* and Screeching Weasel’s *Formula 27*. Many of us are very good at coming up with names and titles.

in anything. A type of two-way trade-off. McLaren – and many others from the 70s onwards to the 90s, depending on how close to the imperial centre(s) you lived in: Ian McKay, Jello Biafra, Kathleen Hanna, Henry Rollins, Poly Styrene, et al. – had an outsized influence that reverberated across the global underground. These figures were considered its antecedents in how they paved the way, going as they did especially in the era of the Cold War where rebellion had a certain social cost – even if insidious co-optations hummed in the background unawares, only to reveal themselves much later. We are beginning to see more of its vestiges now. Nevertheless, it is not dissimilar to the current phenomenon of seeing a relatable person gain attention as an influencer: if they could do it, then couldn't we, too? It isn't enough simply being a spectator. 'Getting involved' – as it's frequently used as a summoning of sorts – is almost an imperative, otherwise it's difficult for others to see how you can be considered a part of it; it requires a certain commitment, at times even be willing to entertain the idea of an initiation. It depends on how agreeable you are, how pure one thinks the scene is, how uncommodifiable you reckon the whole thing is.

But the thing was that it was always going to be subject to commodification, because it had never been sacred and pure. It's a kind of enduring fantasy, a dream that you can very well see out to the very end. It is, as philosopher Agnes Callard defines in her book *Aspiration*, 'the distinctive form of agency directed at the acquisition of values' – an aspiration, as it were. To new adherents however, that was the very basis itself: a gleaming illusion, a new kind of hope, something that could very well be the last bastion of trueness. We were trying to locate our homes. The doctrine had been received. I'm speaking from experience. It goes through cycles and it splits into sects. Impossible to police; mutating on its own, a reaction to the outside. You're either in it or you're not.

There were often little to no resources at all. No degrees, no capital, no connections, no support, nothing nothing nothing. A friend would jokingly invoke how we all had ‘no future’, a warning that had been passed down since the state gained independence; a guiding principle that had originated from how it had no natural resources of its own apart from human capital.

But what we lacked at the time we made up for in imagination. While the cracks would only be evident in retrospect, everyone practised a form of class suicide even though the whole thing was nonetheless packaged within a bourgeois sensibility. It was a mixed bag: children of teachers, children of addicts, university students poking their anthropological heads in, kids who were maybe on the brink of houselessness, travelling trust fund kids visiting from the west in their hobo or crusty garb, nerds, freaks, eighteen-year-old street punks who’d get shitfaced every other night. A heterotopia, so to speak. As young people gathering in our late teens and early twenties we were yet to be proximate to that stink that comes with the accrual of respectability. We gotta smash the state, we gotta smash the state. Maybe we need to stop buying those Coopers greens and cigarettes.* We dressed in an – albeit unspoken – sanctioned uniform and talked about money openly. We took each other in, allowed ourselves to fuck up, so we could keep trying. Many were, in various degrees, frequently on the edge of suicide. We’d all gradually discover this later as we angrily mourned those who’d leave us without so much as a letter. A hotbed of experimentalism. How would you know you wanted to commit your life to something if you hadn’t tried at least a couple of alternatives? A frightening thought.

* These two lines are from a song by the band Amateur Drunks. Thanks, Edo!

We should have known. We should have been exposed to political theory earlier, known that the idea of ‘freedom’ in the free market was an intellectual ruse, capitalism’s most famous trick. But if we did, maybe the subculture would not have existed at all. Like many others around me, I was so desperate for freedom I wouldn’t have known it if freedom hit me over the head with its axe. I get it: we can play the game towards our advantage, even ‘ironically’, but what happens after? Rightfully, offer some congratulations. Wrongfully, bitch about ‘selling out’. Rightfully, bitch about ‘selling out’. Wrongfully, offer some congratulations. We were experiencing our very own version of what our predecessors had already witnessed decades prior. The comment sections were aflutter after a well-known grind band agreed to play a festival sponsored by a multinational automobile corporation. I was so flummoxed by this dilemma that I contributed a column in a friend’s zine. ‘A lot of us, in our years of “punk education” come up against the metaphorical crossroads: after going through the Process: of exhilarated discovery to weary disillusionment ...’

That year lifestyle’s suffocating presence loomed large, casting a bleak shadow and obscuring the once-promising horizon. Although it was a spectre that had already been stalking me, it was beginning to emerge much more forcefully, clinging to my conscience as both camps waged their merciless battle inside my head. Crushed by the weight of authoritarianism veiled as democracy I lacked the strength to fight back. Already, having to survive was dampening every desire. I remember asking myself if I regretted anything, nearly got a tattoo of ‘je ne regrette rien’ somewhere on my body. Never look back! Really, it was beginning to dawn on me that this was a social circle just like any other – its landscape sporadically populated by a few thousand people scattered across the globe producing records

and zines, crafting passable art out of discarded magazines, bargain bin watercolours, found objects, diaristic recollections, little seemingly worth cherishing or defending. You learn, you unlearn, you relearn, you unlearn. What if we were wrong; what if ideology was a function, not an identity? As Jean Baudrillard wrote so acutely in *Impossible Exchange*, ‘Sovereignty was a mastery; identity is merely a reference’.

It was where I learned that I could do anything. Anything that I could get away with, at least, and without asking. If I hadn't learned how to socialise at gigs I wouldn't have known how to conduct relationships at all. It was in this space where we, building on from the unnameable resentments that couldn't be stifled as a result of our chaotic upbringings, learned how to defy society's expectations, refusing to foreground permission, hoard information and fetishise professionalism. It was where I discovered zines and self-publishing, learned that I could write. Bands were started on a whim, disbanding as quickly after. There were no yardsticks. No one explicitly told me I *couldn't*, and the more transgressions I committed the more I felt a part of the counterculture.

But I never went as far as Navin. He kept getting arrested.* Conversely, I nearly shat my pants when the police contacted me asking if I had a permit for a SlutWalk event I was organising. I had already explicitly stated that it wasn't going to be a protest, referring to myself as a graphic designer when the media spoke to me. There was so much red tape to begin with – we had to depoliticise it all the way down, veil it as a 'fun' event and not a bunch of feminists wanting to advocate against rape culture. This is the reality of living in a neo-colonial 'hybrid regime', its systems a hodgepodge of governances mashed together on a stick. Plus, being Chinese, I had never really had any major encounters with pigs, especially not for things significantly more consequential than petty crime. There were times where I questioned myself as to why I was even doing what I was doing, and in times of hopeless self-critique would conclude that it was to make myself feel like I was playing the part,

* Later, some years after I had moved away, I found out he had been put in solitary confinement, not unlike the so-called communists the state had detained without trial in the 60s and then again in the 80s; naturally the media painted him as stark raving mad. And he did go mad. I don't know where he is now.

show the men – they made up about 90 per cent* of the scene at the time – that I was capable of doing the same things. I had to do *something*, didn't I? I had to give back, had to get involved. I'd write my little scene reports, interview bands, critique the state of the microcosm I existed in, a few little political missives. People said they enjoyed it. I was still working at the cybercafe, so it was easy for me to keep doing it. I put my boss's printer to good use.

Those years caused me to realise that language had a perverse kind of power. I never really had any kind of power in my life; no, scratch that: I had never been made to feel empowered. There was so much to learn. Sometimes we used our politics – newfound or otherwise – to gain power over others. What kinds of trauma did one have to endure as a child to result in this allegiance to structures of power, aestheticised?

Regardless, exposure to those knowledges was how I learned how to survive in a material sense, yet still be able to do what I wanted, when I wanted, with the little time and money I had. It's where you can teach yourself how to be savvy with business as you organise gigs, tally the value of old records, master the language of marketing to promote gigs and the things you made to sell. The future? Forget it – only the present existed at any given moment in time.† It was perhaps the precursor to the omnipresent presentism we see now. We might have unwittingly

* Again, the prevalence of women in scenes was subject to the version of capitalism you lived within. It is still very male-dominated in many parts of the world.

† Pit: What's the future for Poison Idea?

Pig Champion: There is no future.

Jerry A: There's only right now. We could die tonight.

—Excerpt from an interview between Poison Idea and Patrick Barber from *The Pit* zine, Autumn 1998

been preparing for it all along. It seemed second nature that the entrepreneurialism the subculture instilled in us was at the same time symptomatic of what we frequently worked hard to reject; we were fuck-ups but we also had something to sell. It was the pursuit of impossibility, so to speak.

In *Money's Nothing*, Lisa Carver's 2015 collection of essays, she writes:

The collapse of our anything-for-adventure DIY civilisation was all so ephemeral. We'd already been working at the poverty line fourteen hours a day seven days a week for years. Some of us had children. When the economy tightened, there was nothing left to squeeze except our beliefs.

This occurred around the time when the insult 'sell-out' was starting to turn into an anachronism. The trickle-down effect from the global financial crisis was enormous, arguably more so than previous iterations. Maybe some people had stronger anti-capitalist belief systems than others, but everyone was dragged down with it unless they had a solid material foundation in the first place. But what's undeniable about counterculture, even before 2008, is that each scene transforms in tandem with the locations they are born in, its histories eventually getting dragged down alongside inexorable changes in that particular urban landscape – it is easy to witness venues, bands, inclinations and motivations dissolve in such a setting as people gave up, ran out of money, moved on, apparently grew the fuck up. Like art itself, its inherent irreconcilability made it especially prone to gentrification, even if it was itself a source of gentrification. As Sarah Schulman establishes, 'Gentrification is a process that hides the apparatus of domination from the dominant themselves.'

Few people had time to document each moment in time apart from a fervent few. Archives are scattershot. The internal economy we had created would often see cultural products change hands without so much as an afterthought. We'd sit

around in drunk circles and quiz each other on whether the other knew of the existence of such-and-such, or ‘was there’. That sort of thing became a secret handshake of sorts, not always easy to look up online. Perhaps that is the trueness we continue to hunger for, even if it always feels just out of reach. See how I’m not naming names.

What happened? Our forebears would probably know how to answer that question – after all, they’d seen it before. Except this time the monstrosity was larger, more far-reaching, seemingly much harder to contain. It happened around the time the word ‘community’ became co-opted by tech corporations, having evolved from its beginnings as start-ups which proselytised the ‘sharing economy’ they were building. Few could pre-empt the long game that Big Tech was playing, especially not at a time when techno-optimism was being placed front and centre, its inventions cast with a nascent radiance. ‘Our mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together,’ crooned one, and it’ll all sound so believable because the language that was being used was the persuasive language of marketing, and which we were already using to espouse similar ideas. Here was a new kind of realism, a capitalist one, which Fisher defines as ‘a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action’.

It was in these conditions that start-up mentality would flourish as it closed in on our little communities, its momentum increasing in the years between 2008 and 2016 and leading to a force that has been unrelenting ever since. Feel free to connect the dots. The fallout from the events of the world, based on what was pre-eminent, was commencing its downward ooze once again. As with all co-opted cultural products, new markets would be tapped where new groups were encouraged to emerge, each with similar grand ambitions that would build on the initial sell. It was a time of great fallout, but it was also a time of the great cash-in. Some notable people – whether that was through sheer talent alone was a matter to be debated – were funnelled upstream towards a kind of underground-adjacent mainstream

visibility, becoming exemplars for a whole new generation of aspiring professional weirdos. History was repeating itself. It became challenging to discern who had a profit motive, what their affiliations were. Furthermore, as Schulman points out, people generally ‘did not know their own legacy of leadership’. Due to the fact that there is no playbook – that there are ‘no rules’ – there is little understanding of what can be made to last in a way that is ultimately resistant to anterograde amnesia.

It was also around this time that the small businesses that the underground had so lovingly nurtured – record labels, screen-printing services, band bookers, et al. – began to run themselves like monopolies, resulting in a chilling effect. You couldn’t possibly call out that one alternative record store in town for underpaying its staff because its very monopoly transpired in a rhizomatic structure that operated like a corporate leadership structure: my friend works there, my band’s records are stocked there, my other friend has done artwork for them, et cetera. I have participated in conversations where someone sees the truth of what I’m saying yet they cannot agree with it due to some kind of personal investment involved, usually to do with social or financial capital. There remains the impression that the entire ecosystem may very well collapse if anything is put under too harsh a scrutiny; the most important thing is that these businesses are ‘keeping the scene alive’, their owners’ capital providing a backbone for the internal economy to continue functioning as planned. The alternative seemed too unknown, too scary; there was absolutely no way we were going to risk being even a tiny bit responsible for destroying our precious havens, and more so if there wasn’t a large enough consensus. But Walter Benjamin had already put it an entire century prior, that ‘the logical outcome of fascism is the aestheticisation of political life’. It ‘seeks to give them [art] an expression while preserving property’.

Mark Fisher writes: ‘At a certain point – a point that is usually only discernible retrospectively – cultures shunt off into the sidings, cease to renew themselves, ossify into Trad. They don’t die, they become undead, surviving on old energy, kept moving, like Baudrillard’s deceased cyclist, only by the weight of inertia.’ He continues naming forms such as jazz and opera: ‘... no longer historic or existential, they become historical and aesthetic – lifestyle options not ways of life.’

We used the language of neoliberalism to advertise ourselves, even if we were outwardly and explicitly against capitalism. At least we had made that clear. We inhabited a peculiar microcosm of the world, comprising the things we rejected against those we tried to reject but ultimately crept up. It was a real-life version of the multiplayer online game *Second Life*, which converted to a real-estate model a year after its launch. While players could still visit for free, those who wanted to own and define elements of the virtual worlds had to pay. Landowners could do anything they wanted: erect a billboard, build a skyscraper, dig a mine, run a company. This could be exchanged for real-world money. Some users opened stores filled with virtual outfits while others became estate agents, selling or renting land in sought-after locations. Not too long after, *BusinessWeek* featured the first *Second Life* millionaire on its cover. The rentier economy had arrived.

Like the SARS-Cov-2 virus, whose varying mutations we now understand emerged from the excesses of capitalism, capital's manifestations were mutating ever more quickly. Was refusal simply enough? How can we update our politics, apply them to the present so as to not regurgitate the past? The underground has always been about what *could* be; we can only keep having fun and fuck shit up. Hope as a daily practice; something we *have*, not something we do.*

It was the cultural equivalent of the galaxy brain, something that would only continue transmogrifying due to *and* in spite of counterculture's uncapturable fleetingness. You could keep stacking narratives atop one another – if you lived in one corner of the world you'd see one iteration, but there were many others too, depending on where the dominant culture was situated on capitalism's spectrum. Steampunk made sense in Poland. Vaporwave did not in India. Go further into Asia, and you would encounter scenes that had yet to – as it's described – 'mature',† and which would feature primarily metal and metalcore, as those genres were more universally mainstream due to their having sprung from the less ironic, modernism-worshipping corners of the western world.

As such, the first skinhead‡ band from China was worthy of celebration. Slayer worship bands in Indonesia. My Chemical

* Thank you, Mariame Kaba, for this wisdom.

† Evidently, this is a hangover from conservative geopolitical parlance that measures nation-states as 'developed' or 'developing'. How easily this stuff is etched within what is supposedly a counterculture that strives towards utopia.

‡ S.H.A.R.P skins oi oi! S.H.A.R.P stands for 'Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice'.

Romance-influenced type music from Vietnam. Indian Cannibal Corpse soundalikes. Through this we can draw parallels to how, in the global north, aesthetics and symbols from the underground would gradually make their way from inner-city areas to far-flung suburbs and country towns. You could wander from city to city – and in some cases, towns – and encounter a completely different aesthetic, a completely different sound. Yet it was evident that bands from the United States and Western Europe generally led the charge. It was exciting to discover a ‘Philly sound’, or listen to the familiar sounds of crust-punk or hardcore in a language that wasn’t English: Italian, Swedish, Danish, German, Spanish. Being able to intergrate this anglophilic underground culture into local languages and scenes carried a sense of exoticism, especially as it worked with europhilia and japanophilia to bring about what seemed a rounder whole; despite a certain degree of political awareness the imperialisms were too entrenched to reject. That said, some scenes – in Indonesia, for example – really have made it their own.

Still, there was something much more high stakes about it in our tiny corner of the world, particularly in the 2000s when social media had yet to take root in the way it has now. While the sociopolitical conditions we had to grapple with were not particularly exceptional, as there were similar societies in neighbouring regions, the nation-state’s cosmopolitan veneer saw capital flourishing in a way that came at the expense of human rights and the majority of its residents. Migrants from other parts of Asia would uproot their entire lives and livelihoods in order to get a chance at seeking their fortune only to learn it was all a lie. The streets had never been paved with gold.

There was that saying that was circulating then: that we were living in a first-world country with a third-world mentality.

While these are questionable terms, it became a shorthand to express the frustration many were feeling. Going against the grain in any way was considered a triumph: punx is resistance and we felt it. To be able to pursue art and curiosity to its very ends, in subterfuge, obliquely sidestepping the existing state of affairs while trying to get the message across, but also while being ensconced in riches – a ‘Disneyland with a death penalty’, as one sci-fi author identified.* There was so much more to lose. It wasn’t just put on your battle jacket post stream of consciousness anti-government rant on social media playing like cool cats. It wasn’t quite like that at all. Put an Asian band next to a western band and sometimes the distinction is so obvious: the energy, the affect. Some of us really wanted to smash imperialism. It wasn’t just a slogan. Writing and singing songs about it was our way of wanting to actualise it, scream it into existence. We were so angry we wanted to tear everything down, but it was a learned helplessness, too.

* Sci-fi author William Gibson’s first major piece of non-fiction, published in the Sept/Oct 1993 issue of *Wired*.

Q: Have you ever had any dodgy interactions with bands on tour? Have you ever noticed people acting sexist, racist, tokenistic, patronising or privileged/bratty? Please tell us about those interactions.*

A: Definitely. I'm not going to name names but I have personally witnessed [these things]:

- Bands who didn't want to understand the different cultures they were facing but instead chose to make inappropriate comments they thought were hilarious;
- People who exoticised the cultures they were experiencing, for e.g. 'I wish we had these little carts selling food where we came from!' and 'I wish I was Asian!'; etc.;
- People who thought it amazing that I speak English 'so well' (countless times);
- Bands who didn't appreciate the hospitality that was being shown to them and wanted things to happen on their own terms or based on what they were usually comfortable with where they came from, for e.g. insisting to sleep in a hotel instead of at someone's home, because it didn't match their level of comfort or cleanliness;
- Bands who chose instead to stick among themselves instead of making an effort to interact with local kids for whatever reason;
- Bands I felt were simply using Southeast Asia as a 'stepping stone' of sorts to either gain credibility with their friends and scene back home or who wanted to use the region as a primer of sorts before embarking on 'bigger' tours in

* An excerpt from an interview in 2013 conducted with me by my friend Vo in their zine *Fix My Head*.

the United States and Europe – seeing our scenes as an ‘Other’, so to speak;

- Bands who saw the tour as some kind of ‘exotic adventure’, where they could do all this wild and crazy shit they wouldn’t normally do in their safe white countries;
- Bands who blatantly or unknowingly got off on the post-colonial adulation of the west that occurs in Southeast Asia, which then enabled them to feel like rockstars;
- People commenting that I had ‘no accent’ like it was meant to be a compliment;
- Men who made me feel uncomfortable because they made me feel like I wasn’t really part of the tour or show organising, merely ‘helping out’ the dudes, or invaded my personal space with too much touching.

Q: Have you ever felt like you were representing or being a spokesperson for ‘Asia’ or ‘Asians’ to people from bands that have been on tour?

A: Oftentimes I get asked about Japanese or Indonesian culture like I am supposed to know about them. Or SE Asia gets lumped into this one monolithic mess where the people from the different countries are one and the same.

Q: Do you feel that there is a cultural hierarchy when it comes to bands/politics from North America, England or Australia/Aotearoa, and how does that play out that you have seen?

A: As a friend of mine summed it up, ‘We fight American culture with American subculture’. Many kids are first exposed to zines and bands from the States, so SE Asian scenes are definitely heavily influenced by that. I think as a result of imperialism and globalisation, western outputs are paid more attention to.

That said, I think this is shifting somewhat in the past few years, especially as many more Southeast Asian punks have become more critical, working to create and build scenes that move away from the romanticisation of western subcultural resistance.

It was how I began to even know anything about the world beyond the limits of the borders I was born within. Beyond authoritarianism, beyond anti-globalism, beyond multiculturalism. It wasn't so simple such that we'd annihilated the borders between us, but a more complex unravelling of them. Some people didn't even know that was the objective. That was probably what made it strange.

As the late countercultural novelist Katherine Dunn once said in an interview about her first novel *Geek Love*, ‘... within a social structure, a familial structure, or a cultural structure of various kinds, there is a substitute for actual freedom. [...] we have no idea what it means, except within a context – freedom to do what? So [...] freedom becomes defined by power, your ability to make choices, and the power relationship within a family, any family.’

I guess it was a way of escaping the limits of the nuclear family. We wanted to arrest the connection that many of us grew up lacking, so we’d go in search of it. Things would just happen. Often there was no plan. You either couldn’t or refused to. It didn’t matter in the end: paths would converge.

Accordingly, there were no allegiances other than the repressed, entrenched ones which would worm their way in via elaborate acts of subterfuge. People learned to conceal what they thought were politically incorrect opinions and choices. In lieu of that, they wore them proudly on their sleeve as if they were statements; being a contrarian of any kind had a certain cultural cachet with particular sub-sects. That should have acted as a foreshadowing for the people we would lose to right-wing conspiracy theories later. In the midst of wanting to conceal desires and motivations considered shameful and sacrilegious, we would end up surrounding ourselves with sexual assault, emotional abuse, long drawn-out arguments which focused on trivialities that were not too dissimilar from a social media blow-up.

Those early online arguments were a kind of proto digital outrage, which as Byung-Chul Han writes in *In The Swarm*, ‘admits neither action nor narration [...] devoid of the power to act’. Perhaps it’s part and parcel of the alienation that increases in a capitalist realism, in a subculture that encouraged and

thrived alongside its conception, doomed from the start. It's what Fisher describes as a 'reflexive impotence', where our many opposing knowledges end up inducing an immobilisation. This might be the reason why some of us break away only to continue creating microcosms that replicate the exterior. A fun and funny lifestyle that's an ongoing and fluctuating vortex and we're all sucked in.

Here we see the wheel reinvent itself: little replicas of replicas with a few minor parts shifted around. Frederic Jameson refers to this as 'a series of pure and unrelated presents in time' – an echo chamber merely reacting to its own structures, and which had been derived from the dominant paradigm anyway. It was always going to be about the present, and multiple ones at that. A little decontextualisation here, a little appropriation there; at the end of the day the image is slightly different, tweaked such that it resembles a computerised image, an uncanny valley.

When I moved to Australia in 2012, it wasn't difficult to find a network immediately. I had already packed up 40 kilograms of my worldly belongings; I was simply moving to another community. Upon arrival I threw my backpack onto the ground of the warehouse space I was moving into – I was home again. It didn't matter that the rooms had no windows save one; any room can be a bedroom if you consider yourself a creative thinker. Migrants search for people from whence they came; punk migrants search for people from whence we came. Often all it takes is a contact, a friend of a friend who would point you somewhere, if they didn't go so far as to want to meet you themselves. People come together for various reasons: shared nationality, a passion for a specific sport, devotion to religious faith, the necessity of prioritising work. Others get together due to their mutual sense of social alienation.

Here, it was as if I had unlocked a new level in a game, but with cheat codes that I'd managed to gather from the same community of cheaters. Someone gave me a masterclass on navigating the dole. We didn't look at the fine print – it would be another decade or so before I would be deemed eligible. Another helped us find a house to live in when it was time to move on from the warehouse. Someone else helped me out with a job. Another gave me advice on how to seek recourse after I had been ripped off by a crooked employer.

It felt like the freedom I was looking for. Here I could say anything I wanted and not feel fear. I could join herds of people in mass protests where we were permitted to explicitly display our stances against the state. But it was also where I began to notice that resistance was somehow even more of a lifestyle; how it seemed for some to be merely an identity and nothing more. People would say one thing in public and do something else in private. Then there were others who did the opposite: going out

to the forests to blockade, organising in secret, quietly building political alliances. But that would give in to infighting as well. It just seemed so much more ludicrous. To live in a place that felt like things were so easy – people were generally safe and complacent in a way that filled me with both hope and despair. So much inertia, complaining ... when it could have been all for the taking. Do you even understand?

It was a kind of jam: a paper jam, probably, in how it was a frustrating triviality that kept on returning, and which needed fixing in order for the task to continue irrespective of your feelings. There was the sense that history was being created through the unrelenting foregrounding of the present, ready to be picked up again by whoever happens to take up the new mantle. It is, as Schulman observes, ‘a distorted sense of them[our]selves as timeless’, and what McPheeters sees as ‘reacting solely to its own brief and deep past’, a cultural amnesia that is simultaneously revisionistic and ahistorical yet celebrates past heroes to the detriment of the present. As always, that was highly dependent on the level of capitalism one saw themselves within, but we were going to be in deep shit whether we foresaw it or not.

Of course, as it goes, some gentrifications were so complete you’d never see any of their traces. You wouldn’t think that there was a pre-existing history that had been scrubbed out. Whole suburbs decimated and uprooted, entire organisations gutted and restructured, minds that saw the totality of assimilation.* Radio stations that used to be independent but have now become a meme deployed for ribbing. DIY spaces turned into co-working lofts and craft beer breweries. Ex-revolutionaries converted into mouthpieces for start-ups and NGOs.

It was around this time when it began to dawn on me that those precious times had vanished. Those times in which you’d enter a house, notice a particular book and know immediately that that person was your people. A band t-shirt spotted across

* The remainder would get pushed out to scenes further underground, where cynicism brought about by witnessing these changes would breed apathy and contrarianism edging on apoliticism, or worse, right-wing ideals.

the street or in a random airport somewhere in the world. It almost goes without saying that a friendship would be started not long after, or there and then. It was a kind of signalling. A dog whistle of sorts. That is, until the right co-opted it, took our anti-establishment ideas and postures and turned them inside out. Some of them came from inside the house. In a sense the contemporary alt-right is considered adjacent to the underground. ‘Abuse of power comes as no surprise’, so goes the Jenny Holzer aphorism.

I read punk memoirs and think, am I going to sound like this, a wet rag continually bemoaning the underground's recurring demise? Shut the fuck up, Greg Graffin! There was a break in mass culture every time someone announced this supposed death. The announcement was a part of the spectacle. Sometimes it was a way to cash in.

It was a Marxian metabolic rift, except the natural environment wasn't the thing that was being alienated. We were using the language of capital to refute its logics. By then it's become entrenched, you're in too deep, it's too late to step off the train now, which is exactly like how you got into it in the first place. The spin-cycle of lifestyle: what saves you entraps you further; the land of no return – your mind has already been moulded by its structures and affects, which makes reintegrating into so-called 'regular' society comparatively even more onerous – 'a very poor preparation punk rock had been for later life'.* You've already spent so much time within it. The contrast becomes jarring: to extricate yourself and not experience its lingering effects, how it used to shape the entirety of your world, your understanding of reality. It's the Schrödinger's cat of the psyche: both things are equally true, the cat is both alive and dead at the same time, a rudimentary drawing of quantum mechanics superimposed on a mind. We were all addicted to these environments. There is something so captivating about always being on the edge, on that shaky precipice of promise – something new and something cool is just lurking around the corner and we'd arrive at it if we kick around long enough.

* This is what French punk novelist Virginie Despentes describes in relation to two characters in her novel *Bye Bye Blondie*.

But it wasn't ignorance, either: many of us were clued in to the fact that we were, to once again borrow from Fisher, 'replicants' – 'that everything that seemed to be inside was bio-psycho-social machinery that should be re-programmed or stripped out'. It was a kind of suspension of (dis)belief, a condition in which people hold onto fantasies or ideals that turn out to be detrimental to their well-being but continue to do so anyway.

But the counterculture's inherent presentism made it such that no one could have really anticipated the future, even if there had been earlier iterations of the same thing – what Fisher had portended as 'the forgetting that the memories were false, that the domestic scene was so much pasteboard and image virus'. How was I to know? Why would we take the rhetoric of liberalism and apply it in a space that's supposed to widen the imagination, create meaningful political change, cement a lasting legacy of meaning? It was entryism at its best, an environment which was reliant on the foundations outside our little microcosms before anything had even been internally laid down. The intrinsic contradictions are what paradoxically make it thrive. We were kidding ourselves when we thought we were doing anything to annihilate the status quo. Especially not when it was watered down and made out to be easily understood.

If entryism is a prerequisite towards someone 'discovering' a counterculture, then how could it continue to be youth-led? If one has to 'mature' in order to be 'realistic' (as opposed to being 'idealistic'), then the entryist wheel turns on. The problem, as well, may lie in how the splintering of subculture through the framework of lifestyle has been absorbed by neo-conservatism and its adherents. If neo-cons are self-proclaimed

leftists who eventually became ‘mugged by reality’,* then lifestyle will continue yelling its clarion call.

* Borrowing from neo-conservative Irving Kristol, whom we know speaks from lived experience.

In *Friction*, Anna Tsing's ethnography of connection across borders, she writes, 'Collaboration is not a simple sharing of information. There is no reason to assume collaborators share common goals. In transnational collaborations, overlapping but discrepant forms of cosmopolitanism may inform contributors, allowing them to converse – but across difference.' She continues to note that 'collaborations create new interests and identities, but not to everyone's benefit. In standardising global knowledge, for example, truths that are incompatible are suppressed. Globally circulating knowledge creates new gaps even as it grows through the frictions of encounter.'

The underground was how I managed to meet and get to know people from as far away as Finland. I learned about New Caledonia this way. There's a grindcore band there. Someone else had spent a month travelling across the archipelagos of the Philippines, returning to regale us with what they'd seen and experienced. It was a kind of globalised 'colourblindness' akin to a United Colours of Benetton ad – identity markers simultaneously did and did not define us. In fact it alienated us: the throughline was that we had grown up in societies that didn't seem to want to understand us, and what we had in common outside of cosmetic trivialities was that we were inexorably bound by this love for the underground and the weird.

It was almost a utopia, a new kind of relation, which Édouard Glissant describes as 'one that trembles – physically, geologically, mentally, spiritually – because it seeks the point, that utopian point, at which all the cultures of the world, all the imaginations of the world can meet and understand each other without being dispersed or lost'. What I'm trying to say is that there was so much opportunity. Yet most of us looked up to North American bands, Japanese bands, Western European bands. That's when you know what parts of the culture had been exported, what is given pride of place, in spite of its overarching opposition to imperial tendencies. I'd listen to a bunch of white guys from Texas growl songs about US imperialism and feel it speak volumes. I'd memorise the lyrics to a song by a Swedish hardcore-punk band titled 'Att åldras med sti' which begins: 'Ännu etr år har getting och

man har knappast blivit yngre. Att se sig själv I spegeln, for varje år blir det lite tyngre’* without knowing what it meant. ‘Profound freedom!’† The hegemony was well and alive in the underground – you can call it ‘DIY punk universalism’, a kind of seamlessness that isn’t out of place on an algorithm now. As Gayatri Spivak writes in *An Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization*, globalisation occurs within ‘data and capital’, ‘with no specificity towards the metropolitan end, only uniformization’.

* I only learned what the song was about when I checked it for the purposes of this essay. Translation: ‘Another year has gone by, and one has hardly gotten younger. Looking at oneself in the mirror, for each year, it becomes a bit heavier.’ How very funny.

† This is a Death Side song, from the Burning Spirits sub-subculture, which solidified its presence from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, where people made a point of espousing the search for freedom. This musical style would influence bands in the United States (under the umbrella of the neo-crust genre) in the late 1990s through to the 2000s.

‘Maybe that is the endurance: when you want to leave and you cannot. You could: clearly a lot of people have already left us, they just talk for us and about us but they’re gone. They’re like, “I’m out, and I’m going to cash in, it’s an investment portfolio.” And I get it, I mean, why would anybody want to suffer? It’s like, where’s the exit door to this? People find it and hop the train or plane and they’re gone.’

Joy James, *In Pursuit of Revolutionary Love*

‘What is this process? What is this thing that homogenizes complexity, difference, dynamic dialogic action for change and replaces it with sameness? With a kind of institutionalization of culture? With a lack of demand on the powers that be? With containment?’

Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*

It could've continued being so enticing, so full of life. I'm seeing subcultural thinkers absorbed into the institution and its structures. It's a lineage. Or a pipeline. A bunch of people who'd already been inculcated into entrepreneurialism and who needed to continue finding a way to live as they age, to continue making art and other things we personally wanted to see become a reality even if it had to be sold on the general marketplace. Our histories bestowed a particular lustre to our reputations, gave our images a certain credibility. It was McLaren's bullshit all over again. Whichever way you see it, the underground turned out to be our incubator for the outside world, in this case the structures we despised. Comrades lost to the pull, putting aside once-radical refusenik politics to agree to endeavours they would in the past wholeheartedly condemn – in the end there was no difference. There was the anarchist cryptographer who created a popular end-to-end encrypted messaging app, later going on to collaborate with Twitter and Google. Someone whom I never thought would deign to have their small business featured in the state newspaper. That band who played a major festival clearly funded by the zionist lobby. Then there were the ones whose defections came as no surprise.

Although the idea of 'selling out' was now firmly an anachronism, in how much the economy and its logics have taken over our lives and suffused them with a sense of choicelessness, some choices still seemed much more non-negotiable than others. You *could* say no to this institution. You *could* have turned down this nomination. You could have rejected an offer from this label that is all glitz and no substance, bands signed and dropped as soon as they are no longer profitable. Yet it looked so good to be endorsed, to announce on Instagram how you feel so very honoured to be considered part of a chosen few. Cultural prestige is a drug. The CEO of Soft Skull Press is

Elizabeth Koch, daughter of the Koch empire, who has famously referred to herself as ‘apolitical’. Kill Rock Stars didn’t actually ‘kill rock stars’, with the label’s co-owner announcing in 2006 that he would be leaving to work as an A&R representative at a Warner Music subsidiary.* Feel free to look up the trajectory of SXSW, 50 per cent of which is now owned by Jay Penske of Penske Media Corporation,† who in 2018 took a \$200 million investment stake from a Saudi government-backed company the same year that dissident reporter Jamal Khashoggi was murdered and dismembered under orders from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

I wonder: were these conduits a way of rehabilitating lonely kids from bad families towards upward mobility, even if they cursed that mobility in the same breath? During the throes of entryism few would think of looking for interlocking threads, much less have an opinion against nefarious ones. It was so enticing, so full of life – why question it? For all its immanent possibilities, the scene presented a limitation that was akin to a glass ceiling, except this one was frankensteined and made from tarp. People would hit a plateau as to how far they could be seen and celebrated beyond the underground framework before becoming integrated into the dominant culture.

* For what it’s worth, Slim Moon could have made this move in order to learn the workings of the corporate music industry – to change it from the inside, so to speak. He returned to manage Kill Rock Stars in 2019. That said, in 2022 the label was acquired by Exceleation Music, whose model appears highly reminiscent of a start-up. Dave Hansen from Epitaph and Anti-Records is listed as one of the founders.

† In November 2023, art publication *Artforum* fired editor-in-chief David Velasco for being a signatory to an open letter calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. *Artforum* is published by a subsidiary of Penske Media Corporation.

Meanwhile, it's an undeniable fact that the delicious yet foul-smelling habitus that was imparted to me from the underground has allowed me to transition more seamlessly into the culture industries. There would be no way I'd know or understand the lexicon if I hadn't been introduced to a blueprint in the first place, especially as someone who did not attend tertiary education. To know the 101 like the back of my hand; all I needed to do was to expand it, take it further, make it more accessible – which can be considered a kind of missionary work. Can the culture industry ever fully capture the scale of state-sanctioned and carceral violence even if it does stoke sympathy in those not directly affected by it? As Svenonius puts it, '[...] the transformative nature of art, which we take for granted, is really a requirement of consumerism. Innovation for its own sake is the artistic version of planned obsolescence.'

Around the mid-2010s, two major DIY venues in my respective hometowns closed, causing reverberations throughout each community. Even if these closures weren't particularly 'new', for they were something that was already recurring in various ways via the many iterations of capitalism, what we were seeing at that very moment in time was a reaction to the rising prices of urban real estate, as well as the complex relations that continue to prevail between artist spaces and gentrification. Moreover, some people in our midst had begun to discern profit motives in a similar way to tech founders. A collusion of minds, you could say.

2014 was also the year other venues were starting to experience rapid popularisation. This time, they arrived as shiny new instruments that resembled our old playgrounds. They were akin to MySpace, which had become a graveyard littered with link rot and deactivated accounts as it teemed with Russian bots. But this was something else – the monstrosity larger, more far-reaching, seemingly much harder to contain.

Those venues had names like Uber and Facebook. Spotify. Instagram. Airbnb. Catchy one-word brands that were turned into verbs and nouns even quicker than Xerox and Kleenex. While their operations are no different from your rank and file corporations, what felt new about them is how they set themselves up as facilitators, as they broker connections between sellers and buyers, between owners and renters, owning nothing themselves other than stocks and equities. A neo-feudal lord. Some went so far as to say that you could possibly own some yourself, either as an employee of the company or as a user.

Although it didn't differ too much from the labour outsourcing playbook from which they had borrowed, what's conveniently welded to it were the tenets appropriated from the gift culture that invariably forms its backbone: Uber from

carpooling; Airbnb from couchsurfing; Substack from blogs, et cetera. But more sinister than that is how they have so firmly imprinted themselves on our day-to-day lives in much of the world, with many of us in the subcultural milieu leaning into its ‘one-stop-shop’ purported conveniences, gradually becoming dependent on the platform economy for every single thing: from promoting gigs to hosting internal conversations between band members to promoting political causes.

Within this formation the distinction between the ‘underground’ and the ‘mainstream’ has become looser, thinner: cultural products can be both underground *and* mainstream, especially as the boundaries between social connection and advertising shrink further. It was hard to tell if someone was selling something or if they were simply making a stand, sharing their feelings. I don’t have to dwell on it surely; many people have written about their effects on our realities.

Yet what was particularly corrupt about Spotify was the way its founder sold it, as it set itself apart from the other Silicon Valley and adjacent start-ups which were sprouting up at the time and which people were beginning to critique. It helped that they were not North American but Swedish, which worked to the company’s advantage as it lent them a utopian exterior based on generalised understandings of that part of the world. Like Facebook, it was deploying our language yet again, that its mission was to ‘get millions of artists making a living off their art’. An attractive premise. Just like how Uber claims itself to not be an employer, Spotify has never claimed to be a gigantic record label, although its inner workings prove otherwise.

In a 2018 essay for *The Baffler*, streaming critic Liz Pelly calls Spotify for what it is: a platform ‘whose “innovations” have undercut an industry that once provided some semblance

of an organic support system'. In its relentless pursuit towards monopolisation, it has encouraged gestures that feed into the pursuit of lifestyle. One prominent example is 'Spotify Wrapped': this is where data is collated and arranged in such a way that people can show their friends the music they listened to the most at the end of each year through a nifty infographic. More recently, the platform has announced plans to introduce a 'Merch Hub' – listeners will be able buy merch from their favourite musicians within the app, while musicians themselves can directly link to their CashApps or GoFundMes. Yet this egalitarian costume conceals the fact that large music companies such as Universal and Sony are part-owners of the platform.

There might be no escaping at all. Even though Bandcamp acts as a less mercenary alternative – often considered the 'better' platform for independent musicians* – it was acquired by major video game company Epic Games in 2022. Within a year, however, a large percentage of staff (1080 in total) was laid off, with Epic reselling Bandcamp to Songtradr, a business-to-business music licensing service, the consequences of which still remain to be seen.

In an article for *Pitchfork*, music journalist Philip Sherburne notes how Bandcamp is a 'crucial lifeline for scenes where love, not money, is the main driver',[†] going on to make a noteworthy observation: 'that not only does Bandcamp sell vinyl, cassettes, and CDs; a big part of its business is digital downloads. Bandcamp customers love music so much that they're willing

* Due to its direct-to-consumer model and lack of algorithmic mediation, we also saw initiatives such as 'Bandcamp Fridays' (which was created as a response to musicians losing income during the height of the pandemic), where the platform forgos its revenue cut for 24 hours every week.

† '(yet money is still kinda necessary to pay the bills)'.

to pay real money for a non-material format that the rest of the market long ago left for dead as it moved to a subscription model'. We do; we still want to be able to download our mp3s, albums lovingly saved in folders complete with inserts and artwork even if we couldn't hold them in our hands. Sometimes they served as a portable version of the physical record we already owned.

What might be worse is that Discogs – another website that the underground has long used as a repository and marketplace for recorded music due to its Wikipedia-esque model – has recently introduced new fees and restrictions that have led to frustration for many users, even more so as its layout and utilisation had essentially remained unchanged since its inception in the 2000s. I want to be surprised, but even if it does revolve around a community-centric model, it is ultimately a start-up. As platforms encounter decay due to economic manipulation orchestrated via rent-seeking means, the culture industry continues to turn on its wheel, and ever faster.

Heck, my band even sold a design on Redbubble for a brief period of time during the pandemic, especially when we thought it hilarious that the print could be reproduced on random household and clothing items: bedsheets, clocks, shower curtains, leggings, phone covers. We wanted to raise money for a sex worker benefit fund, so it seemed to even out. The logic of the platform economy is to automate things, make them easy to do, even if labour rights continue to erode through this model. In this climate our internal economy was seeing signs that it was heading towards complete disintegration, becoming as alienated from the consumer as the general marketplace. It was as if we'd all forgotten that it had previously thrived on goodwill and mutual support, which did not necessitate intermediaries. But this is exactly as McKenzie Wark writes in *The Spectacle of the Disintegration*: 'Where once the spectacle entertained us, now we must entertain each other, while the vulture industries collect the rent.'

Still, someone has to do the work in order to provide the entertainment. As inflation and petrol prices rise to newer heights, online arguments were breaking out again: why did this gig cost \$35? Who was trying to line their pockets, capitalise off the thing that made us? And whether it was true or not, the term 'breaking even' would often be invoked. After all, all-ages venues and warehouses were disappearing, imaginations were shrinking – other costs had to be considered.

We expanded and we made do. It's all we've got, some of us having squandered the better part of our twenties being what a regular citizen of society would call a wreck. What would happen if we never did? We wouldn't have these stories to tell.

Q: In a world where ‘selling out’ is becoming more and more impossible within late capitalist society, how do you negotiate this tension? How do you think you resist co-optation?*

A1: I think not being mindful of how we navigate the opportunities that are offered can lead to going against one’s own principles. It’s a weird dance between exposure to broader audiences – and this can be good to do for a number of reasons – whether it’s just exposing your weird ass craft to freak out some squares, or getting the opportunity to play for a big institution so as to somewhat normalise your craft and thus hopefully open the doors for other artists. But it’s a fine balance: we know there are so many negative possibilities on the flip side. For my own practice, I don’t have expectations about what it’s supposed to be, the number of people I should have listening to it and validating me – I don’t have artistic expectations except that I want to keep doing it.

A2: Not everything can exist in perfect isolation these days. Sure, individuals and collectives who desperately desire to be known for any old thing are fucking annoying, especially when they’re not good at anything, don’t know what they’re talking about, and exploit people around them to do it. Yes, yikes! But also, fame is something that happens to people and that is often beyond their control. Music history is rife with these experiences.

A3: An ongoing tension I’ve noticed within DIY activism is that of grants – as though applying for a grant automatically

* Thank you to Del, Bridget and Fjorn (in no particular order) for articulating these sentiments. I interviewed these musicians while researching an article (‘Dreaming Alternative Futures’) that later appeared in *Gusher* magazine issue 4 (eds. Isabella Trimboli and Juliette Younger).

compromises the autonomy or politics of your project. No doubt it can, [but in my experience] grants have let us run more free workshops, with more equipment, for more people, in more areas, and importantly: to pay more artists. I think the determination to do everything through fundraisers and crowdfunds is kind of weird and needs to be unpacked – why get everyone in your community, who maybe is also struggling, to fund something for them[selves] when there's a bunch of money sitting around for that purpose?

It was easy to tell yourself that you were branching out – that you were sick of having information and knowledges gatekept, particularly when they are suffused with such radical potential. It took us back to our very first encounters with the subterranean spaces that would later hold space for us, give us an incentive to continue the boring business of living. That was often the main argument, but I'd also used this argument so often that I'd no longer be convinced by it. Moreover, many teenagers in small towns and outer metropolitan suburbs often claim that it is mainstream exposure that alerted them to such an ontology in the first place, an alternative way of life and thinking that resulted in their escape from claustrophobic surroundings.

But some of us *had* hit that proverbial ceiling. There was nowhere else to go. It's sometimes enough to look the part, become feted by the fascination of elites – in this way we see capital accrue, a two-way street. The dilemma that comes with taking up the anti-establishment mantle in public, which ends up becoming functional to the interests of the establishment. As the economy weighs down harder on everyone our capacities for refusal are shrinking simply because there isn't yet a groundswell of collective action.

In any case, the culture of one-upping would more often than not rear its head, as people saw themselves weaponising their acquired knowledges against their peers. By this time, as well, the subculture's own philosophies would return to bite its own ass: the accessibility that was often championed – and now mediated through Big Tech – would enable cursory outsiders to enter and comment on our inner workings, leading to many more divisions. But the beast had already been released decades ago. It didn't seem like anything could be quelled; everything else was just damage control.

Institutions, accolades, arena-style stages. We have become freaks for rent. The rentier economy, particularly if you have zero safety nets, eats you up whole. If it was impossible to own anything then I might as well sell everything. Ideas. Persona. Self. It is as Baudrillard notes in *The Illusion of the End*, that the so-called ‘end of the world’ is not a capital-E event but a process of entropy in which nothing that constituted the world is conserved, not even the memory of its disappearance. If there is no memory of it then did it ever really disappear?

And then there was the lexicon of social media promotion. Fuck. It was like we’d been prepared for this future world all along, having been gently nudged towards its direction from the outset. A meta narrative of epic proportions: to wield as a tool the thing that could’ve exiled you to the fringes of society forever if you didn’t turn it into some kind of product. It’s not like people drew up a five-year plan or anything – capitalism is just moving as it’s always intended, and we’re being swept along by its tides as we run up against it over and over while reluctantly getting subsumed. It’s equivalent to the discomfiting revulsion when a co-worker at an office job expresses too much enthusiasm after discovering you play in a band. I’ve just been entertaining myself! And now I’ve got to entertain others too.

I remember wanting to find something from this or that band or author but couldn't at all. I had to go to those websites where 'vintage' or 'cult' stuff was being sold. LPs were marked up 50 per cent. It was horrendous. Yet it wasn't a phenomenon per se. It had already been happening around me years and years before, except I was too young to notice it. Not that I had the disposable income to be exposed to such a marketplace, either. I wouldn't have been able to keep up.

When I sold the entirety of my record collection to fund my move to Australia, I was surprised to find out that some LPs had skyrocketed in value for their obscurity alone. The first limited edition pressing of a record on opaque blue vinyl from a lauded powerviolence band which no longer exists. That went from \$10 to \$60. Today you can simply purchase a 90s-era Obituary t-shirt on eBay for \$200 and make it appear as if you were a fan from the very beginning. There is a sense of speculation, which recalls the art, stock and crypto markets. I was there at the beginning. I was early!

Alongside the longing for pre-digital pasts, particularly in the so-called 'post' pandemic era, the underground facilitates a perennial nostalgia. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym identifies two distinct types: restorative and reflective. 'If restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and specialise time,' she notes, 'reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and demoralises space.' According to her, the former 'takes itself dead seriously' while the latter 'can be ironic and humorous'.

The future of the underground rests on the axis between the two even as its pendulum oscillates wildly from one to the other. Like any group of people unified by a loose set of principles, different people will tell you different things at different eras, as well as at different times of their lives. While it is generally understood that worshipping the past for being a better and more enjoyable time is not to acknowledge the future at all, the presentism that had been instilled in us 'reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, just as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection' as well.

Sometimes you find out someone else is of a different station simply by living with them. The persona becomes inconsistent in the loaded sanctuary of a rental home. You'd encounter those who'd moan about being 'broke' all the time, and yet have their parents deliver them a bunch of groceries at short notice. You witness people's relationships to their property, their values – thrift as a result of virtue, not necessity. But this was inevitable. It is only in your more youthful years that material pressures can be relegated to the background, struggles hidden while they are still in the midst of it being figured out. A kind of keeping up with the Joneses; everyone was just trying to blend in, even if the subculture constantly espoused individual difference. It is only when shit hits the fan that everything begins to show. There was no future, until suddenly there was one.

Maybe that was the hard thing to accept. That there were people in my midst who didn't come from a troubled background, or didn't seem like they'd endured some kind of trauma. It's not that I held all this bad shit to a higher esteem, thought it made us harder, whatever; it was more about the spaces no longer feeling as cloistered and safe, where there was absolutely no requirement for anyone to explain themselves. Where you didn't elicit amazement when you shared little bits of your life experience. Yeah, my mum had to go to hospital after she tried to kill herself when I was twelve. I worked in this fucked up factory that mass-produced potato chips. But I don't know. At its worst it can turn into an ego battle, the storytelling no longer informative or entertaining but told with an abrasive edge.

Was the underground's appeal a result of the fact that it was the first thing we were introduced to? Was it so irresistible simply because it was all we knew? If it was the foremost salvation, then we needn't look elsewhere. Extend that adolescence, stretch it forever. Even if it comes at a cost. But it also prevents alienated young people from prematurely ending their lives.

It can be considered a style of revisionism – we're trying to manifest a less painful present by altering our memories of the past. Rub the board clean and start again as if life never happened. You can be anyone and anything. You can slip in and out. We are, ultimately, living inside an ideology that's a sub-sub-sub sect of capital, where the scene is always getting refreshed due to how it acts on – and is sustained by – impulse. You spend an inordinate amount of time thinking you've invented something totally new. Or you end up cycling through a bunch of niche interests in order to stave off a relentless boredom. And then there are those who lead double lives, even more complicated. I know them to be mostly chaotic figures: chartered accountant by day, raging pisshead by night. Go to work after a bender and pretend to be normal. Two very different types of outfits. Those are the smart ones, I think, but I'm not sure I envy what I imagine would be a devastating psychic toll. Strip everything away and only three things remain: the fun, the escape, the reach for freedom. The rest is just window dressing.

You might think: anyone who survives to tell this tale is a defector. And I might think: you're not wrong. And yet how could I have continued to do the things I loved, in this economy, without having to sacrifice something? It is the hazard of the populist moment, where niche cultural products are inherently imbued with more value than political organising itself, for the latter to be forced to take up the mannerisms of the former in order to progress its ideals, in the hopes that it will not become assimilated by the vulture industries. Lifestyle is trapped inside its own content, and what shines hardest receives the most credibility. Perhaps we have to be consumed by fervour in order to act accordingly. A kind of devotion so overwhelmingly sacrificial that there is no need for reciprocity. A type of belief so all-encompassing and total that we can dedicate our entire lives in service of it. We've surely got to take it up a notch.

SHIT JOBS

clocking in

The Latin for ‘labour’ is suffering. Since work was engineered to corral groups of people into some semblance of organisation, to ostensibly liberate the poor from the trappings of poverty, labour has continued to change its face. Blue-collar, white-collar, physical, emotional, sexual, intellectual, invisible, psychic: regardless, we continue to labour, to be a part of the labour force, both in public and in private. The logic here was that if you worked hard enough, you could simply stop working, or at least be able to work less. You might be able to join the upper classes and begin to signal a disdain for work.

The body that labours contains memories of the work; the work becomes inscribed on our bodies. I’ve witnessed this in myself and the many co-workers I’ve laboured alongside for the past 22 years, as we ground ourselves down along the wheel in the

pursuit of something better. More leisure time. More material things. More possibility, perhaps. For both ourselves and those around us. Work sucks (I know), but equally it is suicide to opt out. It is unfortunate that work is an inevitability just as precarity is an inevitability. Most don't get to choose. Hour upon hour, each minute with an eye cast askance on the clock, while on the clock. It is having to make it work, for otherwise it would not work.

David Graeber notes in his book *Bullshit Jobs* that work remains a type of 'spiritual violence directed at the essence of what it means to be a human being'. I attempt to find friendship at work, trawl r/antiwork on my days off, hoping to find some kind of solidarity, some kind of instruction. Should labour be a tool or an extension of our desires? A fierce desire to destroy the work model, or, if that was too naïve, at least become an expert at knowing how to exploit bosses more than they were exploiting me.

I remember reading CrimethInc. books as I came of age, daydreaming about living lives like those anonymous train-hoppers and dilettantes from *Evasion*. They always sounded made up. I didn't know there was such a thing as a 'trust-fund kid' then, so I thought they must've worked hard, or found a secret trick, or something, to be able to shirk work as they did. All that irresponsible idling, time an expanse stretched out with abandon where there was no need to do anything in a rush, and where there was always tomorrow. I suppose safety nets are there to catch you when one falls from grace, otherwise you might as well fling yourself headlong into a chasm.

It was here where I also started to wonder how so many of us couldn't, as Graeber puts it, 'knit sweaters, play with their dogs, start a garage band, experiment with new recipes, or sit in cafes arguing about politics and gossiping about their friends'

complex polyamorous love affairs'. I did approximations of those things, of course, but they were always at the expense of something else. Sometimes those things would become monetised, into a job, because it was the only way to make it make sense, feel a little bit less ripped off. There were times as well, especially in the early days, where I didn't have the guts to resign from a job, so I simply never returned. They'd call me, and I'd ignore them while I searched for another job. When I switched my phone back on again they'd have already moved on, as would I, with a brand-new job, ready to begin the cycle once again. In these settings I was simply another worker, my name and face as quickly scrubbed from memory as my personal details in work databases, and as quickly inducted and hired through a similar process somewhere else. As Amber Husain writes in *Replace Me*, 'For as long as we [...] were replaceable, our condition of relative powerlessness could be upheld'. It helps to have low expectations, or a reckless nonchalance that forgoes the dream of material success. Retail? Just whip up a résumé like you've been a shopgirl your whole life. Figure the rest out later.

I see myself shuffling in and out of workplaces, a litany of co-workers and colleagues lined up single-file within a mental rolodex, all of us knowingly walking towards an open grave, where labour's annihilation rests on our collectivisation. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World* Anna Tsing makes a lucid observation: 'Precarity means not being able to plan. But it also stimulates noticing, as one works with what is available.' Within this life of labour, there is no recourse, only the stolen small joys. I am only another pair of legs on this hamster wheel.

water girl

I've lived in Australia for three months, subsisting off savings from my life modelling job, amid other punk-learned endeavours like dumpster-diving and shoplifting. On a reckless whim, I decide that yes, an international romantic relationship can happen, even though we're both young and unsure of the bureaucracies behind orchestrating something like this. What's more important is that we're deeply in love.

A close, well-off friend generously lends me \$10000 so I can put it in my bank account, to look like I have money if the Australian authorities ever check. Between researching how I can find a way to live on this continent as a non-tertiary-educated immigrant with no career prospects, I gradually find myself without regular income. I mention this at a punk show, and my new friend Amy says I can 'totally work cash in hand', a concept I hadn't heard of before. Amy does cash-in-hand work to evade taxation, and one of these jobs is to be a 'water girl' at amateur league AFL games at various Adelaidean suburbs.

Having little interest in any kind of sport, I had never heard of Australian Rules Football until now. The job, at \$50 a pop, involves running out to a location on the field as soon as you notice a little break in the game, because 'the boys' need to be hydrated. On my first day, I turn up in a band t-shirt even though everyone's in athleisure. It didn't cross my mind to try and look sporty, even though if you think about it, of course you're supposed to look sporty at sports. I also run out at the wrong time, to which someone yells, 'Oi China!'. But I don't feel offended, merely amused at their inaccurate guess. I have yet to encounter the real sting of racism.

Amy and I don't drive, so the woman who's in charge of hiring 'the girls' comes to pick us up at a convenient spot in the CBD. These footy games are occasionally located in the outer suburbs, and Adelaide's public transport system is too inefficient to promise a direct route to these secluded ovals. Ophelia is talkative and friendly, often commenting on nearly everything we see on these car rides. 'How Australiana,' she chuckles, when we arrive at a suburb full of Australian-flagged houses one afternoon. At the time, I don't know what that means, but I don't know how to feel about nationalism in a country I wasn't born in, either.

Under Amy's guidance, I learn how to watch the game. 'Which one's your favourite?' one of the girls asks me one day. I stammer and shrug – I've never socialised in a gendered fashion at school as a result of being a loner, and I find rituals like these perplexing. I surmise that the \$50 payment includes chit-chat about which of 'the boys' we consider attractive as well. To some it can be considered a perk. They laugh. I laugh nervously. It's okay! I'm just the token weirdo in this sea of normality. Unlike Amy, I haven't learned to fully hide it. This is cemented one day when Amy tells me a funny story about a guy she's fucking, and I cackle like a maniac, howling, 'NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!' loudly at half-time, when the boys are in a group huddle with their coach. Everyone turns around to stare at me in annoyed bewilderment.

life model

At the cybercafe, I listlessly look through the notifications of an arts industry Yahoo listserv to find a post in strangely worded English, advertising openings for 'art models' at a prestigious university in Singapore. Like those 'WOMEN NEEDED' flyers stuck on lampposts I immediately dismiss it as a scam, but two

days later decide to ring the number out of curiosity. If the ad turns out to be true, then \$40 an hour would be equivalent to hitting the mother lode, particularly so in a country with no minimum wage laws. I don't think I've ever made more than \$10 an hour in my life.

A man answers the phone, and after some polite chit-chat as to my current circumstances (young, and, to increase my chances at getting this job, unemployed and about to begin art school), he requests a meeting at a cafe. I'm wary, but the cafe is in a crowded mall in the middle of the city, so I go.

The university professor takes to me immediately. He likes that I look 'alternative', with my bleached platinum blonde hair and various face piercings, an anomaly in Singapore in the 2000s. After all, as I emphasise, I'm about to begin art school. I also know it's because I'm thin, light-skinned and Chinese. Being from Beijing, he attempts to speak to me in Mandarin; I try for a few sentences, then flounder when the topic goes beyond conversational. He looks frustrated, as many mainland Chinese people are with anglophone Chinese-Singaporeans – but I get the job.

I have no experience, but according to the prof, 'you'll learn quickly', and 'no one has experience starting out doing anything'. All I have to do is to take off my clothes and assume a position worthy of artistic scrutiny to be gazed at by students learning how to be artists in a country where creative thinking has little value. On my first day, I step gingerly into a classroom helmed by a Californian lecturer who yells enthusiastically to her cohort of dead-eyed students, all sitting in a circle with sketchpads on their laps. She continues to lecture, and nearly an hour elapses before I'm asked to step onto the raised podium in the centre of the room. An hour of free money, I think – that's something new. On the podium, I become a robot, doing little

exaggerated actions for several seconds at a time so the people below can make out the contours of my body. The lecturer's exhortations below make me feel as if I'm at an aerobics class. I'm a life.

I do learn quickly. This may be attributed to my usually sedentary hobby of sitting in one position reading for hours on end, but I find that long poses, which last anywhere between 30 minutes to two hours, come easily to me. This job is where I learn the habit of waking up an hour before classes begin, going to work in my pyjamas – I'm going to take them off anyway – and then staring into a false middle distance, bleary-eyed and half-asleep. During these classes, I think about my plans for the week, contemplate something I've read, or think about nothing at all. Contrary to assumption, no one appears creepy, and I don't feel embarrassment. Rather, it's the students who display a coy deference towards me – their subject, but also a living human thing who has chosen to expose what is considered private and vulnerable to strangers for money. How did the body become such a sacred yet abject thing? I gradually get to know other life models in between class changes, and start work at other tertiary institutions which offer fine arts courses.

This is the richest I've ever been. I average between \$700 and \$1000 each week. I begin thinking about travelling outside the country. What does the world look like? For fun, I start a zine distro and a punk touring collective, organising gigs for international bands touring the Southeast Asian region, sometimes going along with them to places as far-flung as the Philippines. Before I know it, my world expands, and I unwittingly learn lessons; I begin to feel more comfortable about my corporeality, more blasé about my body. I will never have a job like this again.

victualler's assistant

'It's fun,' Eileen exclaims. 'You get to everything before the plebs do!' Every couple of months or so, I meet up with a motley crew of women I got to know over LiveJournal. We're moderators of a longstanding local buy-sell-trade group and our positions are highly coveted. It's not unlike being the manager of a thrift store – as soon as someone's used goods arrives, you get first dibs. I never intended to be a moderator, but because I'm already spending so much time on the computer at the cybercafe, Eileen, whom I got to know from a book lovers' community, suggests that I'd be perfect for it.

Eileen is a pint-sized, very excitable woman. I'm drawn to her immediately – she posts Murakami quotes and uses words like 'obtuse' to insult others. She also refers to herself as a 'textual bulimic' and often invokes Nietzsche. When I eventually meet up with her, she seems to like me too, even though we're worlds apart: she's just graduating university to become a lawyer, and I'm a junior college drop-out with hardly any prospects in life. These bi-monthly meetings would go on for years.

One day Eileen gets in touch on Facebook, the newfangled thing everyone's on. It reminds me of Friendster, except you don't leave 'testimonials' – you interact as if you were on chat, but where everyone can see. LiveJournal's still going, but I hardly see updates anymore.

'Sorry for being so MIA the last two years, my internship was really eating up my life! I'm finally done, though, and I don't think I want to become a lawyer lol'. Eileen informs me that she's starting a business with a boyfriend and they're looking for staff. 'I remember you being pretty cool,' she writes. 'If you need

a job, I can pay you \$10 an hour and all you need to do is to help us every now and then’.

I’m still employed as a life model, but the proposition sounds interesting enough, the thought of having more income increasingly appealing. Furthermore, \$10 an hour is pretty fucking good for a customer service role; I remember the last one which paid me half that. The business Eileen is starting is a little cafe-slash-bar-slash-events-venue in a rapidly-gentrifying part of the city, beloved for its colonial-era architecture and refurbished Chinese-style shophouses.

Eileen invites me to meet her there a day before the grand opening, introducing me to Richard, her boyfriend, who knows a lot about coffee because he attended university in Australia. He also knows a lot about Japanese whiskey because he’s travelled to Japan several times, proclaiming himself a ‘Japanophile’. I’m supposed to learn how to make coffees under his guidance, and even though I have never drunk an Australian coffee in my life I decide to give it a shot.

My coffees turn out to be mediocre. How do you copy something to perfection when you have zero understanding of how the original is supposed to seem and taste? I’m not sure what the customers think because I never get any complaints; I wonder to myself if it’s because they know nothing about coffee too, and drinking this so-called Australian flat white provides them with a proximity to the kind of cultural literacy they aspire to.

Most of the customers who come into the cafe are anglo-phone Chinese like I am, except much older. I overhear conversations about poetry and German films. Some of my shifts coincide with spoken-word readings and activist fundraisers, both worlds I gingerly dip my feet into – I like some of these people who regale me with enviable stories about their lives, but otherwise they are generally unrelatable, even though I try and

fill conversations with references to travel, pretending to sound like a seasoned hand when it's still very much a novelty. Money is a thing that opens up your world.

At Eileen and Richard's cafe, I learn to pull German weisse beers and open bottles deftly with a bottle-opener, skills I have to pick up from scratch. At the time, even though I don't consider myself 'straight-edge', I stay away from alcohol and cigarettes for no real reason other than a stubborn holding on to some vague collection of ethics.

One quiet evening, a well-dressed man comes in and orders a whisky on the rocks. Richard and Eileen aren't there on Sundays, and I have no idea what a glass of whisky looks like. Deciding to wing it, I pour from a Yamazaki 12-year bottle and fill the glass to just below the brim. The customer looks at me the whole time, his eyes agog. I give him the drink, and he continues staring at me as if I'm batshit insane. A few seconds of silence. He doesn't say a single word, but finally he finds his voice. 'This isn't how you serve a glass of whisky,' he intones, an eerie calmness in his voice. 'Okay,' I respond, unsure what to do next. He picks up the shot measure and helps himself. 'Cool,' I say. I want to disappear into the ground. He acts like nothing has happened and walks back to his seat, the full glass of whisky still on the bar, its accusing presence amplifying my embarrassment.

service and food champion

The situation at home becomes more unbearable, and I find myself staying late in libraries after school. My mother's anxiety and other unaddressed mental health issues, coupled with my father's apathy, alcoholism and depression, start spilling over

and turn into gaslighting, control and blame. In the face of this, my younger sibling tries to live his life as ordinarily as possible – he plays sports and joins a church, even though the family is non-religious. I sense his scorn whenever we are in the same room. ‘Why don’t you have any friends? You’re so fucking weird,’ he says to me one weekend when all I’ve done is stay in my room and scroll through LiveJournal for twelve hours. I contemplate telling him my friends are online, but that will only confirm his beliefs.

Every day after school, I take a bus that stops outside a row of shops near the apartment block my family lives in in the northeastern part of Singapore. One of these shops is the smallest McDonald’s I’ve ever seen: it’s the size of a newsagents, with only twelve tables – because of this it’s almost kitsch. Aren’t all McDonald’s stores meant to be towering two-storey behemoths with all the space imaginable? One afternoon I see a sign stuck to the window advertising for staff, and my gut instinct tells me to go in to ask for an application form. I return it the next day and they ask for my availability on the spot. Hooray, I’ve landed my first job.

I go home and tell my mother, and she explodes in anger. ‘Do you really need to be working at such a young age?’ And: ‘What will the neighbours think?’ I’ve dealt with these maniacal bouts of abuse before, so I say nothing and disappear into my room. Luckily or unluckily, there are no laws deterring minors from being employed in Singapore; children between the ages of thirteen and fifteen cannot work in an industrial setting ‘unless with family members’, otherwise ‘light work’ is legal. There are no minimum wage laws either. I start the job on \$3.50 an hour, working alongside other teenage miscreants as well as women in their 60s who see no choice of ever retiring in this cut-throat society, glitzy on the outside, miserable on the inside.

My manager is a twenty-something woman called Michelle and she takes her job very seriously. On training day, she shows the newcomers videos set in a 1970s United States, with a transatlantic voiceover that draws our attention to the protocols we have to follow. ‘Always look a customer in the eye, smile, greet them, then ask them what they want. After that – and this is the most important part – ask them if they want to upsize,’ Michelle instructs us. ‘We have to follow all the QCs. If there are any issues, just tell me and I’ll KIV it’. It’s the first time I’ve heard anyone use so many acronyms in one sitting.

I take this first job very seriously. Michelle becomes a model of sorts. When other managers come to appraise the store, I make a show of doing my best. Everyone takes the job equally seriously, working purposefully. Arrive at your shift fifteen minutes prior, change over to the standard-issue uniform, punch in using the time-sheet machine. I enjoy seeing the slip go in and get spat out, like a robot bestowing approval.

There are other firsts: I’m gingerly making friends, even if we don’t make plans to hang out outside of work hours. It’s a great excuse to not be at home: I enjoy working there far too much, goofing around with Belinda and Arif alongside the older women, who inadvertently become grandmother figures, and who tut-tut at our teenage mischiefs but enjoy our juvenile energy anyway; they frequently ask if we’re getting fed, slipping us bits of food that later get written off as waste. I project my familial baggage on them and pretend they’re my siblings and grandmothers – there might be a reason why they refer to workers as ‘the family’ in staff videos. No one ever talks about their life outside of work. I meet my first real girlfriend there. I make double McChickens and quadruple Big Macs, because I can. I like to think I invented the Double Filet O’Fish. After all, they did not credit Alan Dimayuga, a long-time manager in

1970s San Francisco, who was purported to have come up with the Extra Value Meal. One morning, a member of the kitchen staff calls in sick, and Michelle asks me if I can fill their shift when I show up to work that evening, even though I've yet to undergo any training in the kitchen. 'It's really easy, I'll show you,' she tells me, a gurgle of panic in her usually measured voice. She demonstrates how long I should steam the buns for, and how many frozen beef patties to slap onto the grill before it's too many. Each burger is then individually wrapped and slid down the metal chute to appear at the front display behind the counter, hot and perfect for the customer. Michelle is right; it's not hard. If I forget a detail, the playbook is right in front of me, each one the same as the next the world over.

This versatility turns out useful, because I start getting more shifts, alternating between the front counter and the kitchen. But Michelle makes a mistake in an order one day, and I come out of the kitchen to point it out. Big mistake! That day I'm called in for something called 'insubordination'. Michelle is hysterical, so hysterical I can see the veins on her neck pop.

'I'm sorry,' I say, genuinely upset. Until now, I thought it was all fun and games.

After I stop pointing out Michelle's mistakes, the incident is quickly forgotten. My work roster stays the same: one or two nights after school, on the weekends, and as much as I can during school holidays until it's time for O-Levels.

brand ambassador

I can't go back to the recruitment agency because I hadn't given them any notice when I left the job at the bank, so I return to

the trusty classifieds, bearer of jobs. By this time, the tension at home has reached a point wherein I feel I'm a tenant in what is supposedly my family home. I don't look my mother in the eye as I give her money for bills, then disappear into my room to look at the computer screen. 'You'll see!' my mother screeches. 'One day when I win the lottery we will be rich! I will give you all the money in the world!'

I say nothing in return; I'm just glad to owe her nothing so she won't weaponise anything against me later. If the aggressor has no ammunition then I am safe. After all, I am now paying for my room and board. It's a well-worn script she will take to her grave, and I hope under my breath that my sibling will be rich and successful because I sure as hell can't afford the funeral.

But the classifieds deliver again, and after a quick phone call I make my way to a trendy clothing store at a well-known mall on the main shopping drag. The manager gives me a once-over. 'Can you start on the spot?' I'm desperate to have the job, so I agree, and at \$5 an hour begin to sell clothes and shoes to women who are engaging in retail therapy. Every day is a dull struggle: I drag my feet on the way to work and provide emotional labour to shoppers whom I am supposed to make feel at home in my presence, so they'll feel inclined to buy the product, and which also means I can make a 2 per cent commission. We're on the roundabout of validation. 'That looks really good on you!' I lie, after a potential customer steps out of the fitting room. 'Maybe you can match that with this?' I point out items I have little interest in and say I have one exactly like that. In reality, I haven't bought anything, because I'm trying to hold on to every cent.

information input specialist

After six months at junior college, I find myself extremely bored. Do I want to be here? Under Singapore's extremely psychotic education system, where every student is streamlined according to some kind of meritorious intellectual hierarchy that begins as soon as you turn ten years old, undertaking two years of post-secondary study is a surefire way to get you to university, even if I am at the worst-ranking junior college in the country. Having spent the previous year extremely depressed and skipping classes three-quarters of the year, I surprise teachers by doing well at the O-Levels. According to the aforementioned system, this means that I don't have to contend with a mere 'diploma' at a polytechnic, or worse, a 'certificate' at a technical institution – I get a shot at obtaining a degree. In a land where children are often reminded that educational failure guarantees that one will have 'no future', there seems to be a glimmer of hope for me after all.

An extracurricular activity I participate in is librarianship, and the library, as ever, is a salve. Between shelving books I play a game to see how many wallets I can steal from the unguarded bags near the entrance. As much as I try to be as nondescript and invisible as possible, I'm nonetheless disgusted by my schoolmates' flaunting of their socioeconomic status, something I eventually find to be par for the course in junior colleges containing students generally streamlined from the 'independent' (i.e. private) school system. They can't tell I'm not like them, because I don't discuss my home life and speak English as a first language as they do, a consequence of all the books I've read. Most wallets I find contain hundreds of dollars. Mine always contains ten, at most.

It's not long before I get caught. My parents are called into the principal's office. No one mentions the fact that my father has only just gotten out of prison a couple of years ago. 'You are painting a picture that is untrue,' the school principal later admonishes me. For the first time in my life I see that a statement can hold both a truth and a lie.

It is at this point that I don't see the point of returning to school – half wanting to preserve whatever dignity I have left and half not seeing any reason to continue an experience I find abhorrent. My parents work long hours, so they don't have time to coax me into returning; they seem to believe that I can get a job if school doesn't work out. After all, they have noticed how the McJob ended up working out to their benefit even if it was at first a cause for embarrassment. Weeks pass, and it becomes increasingly clear I'm not going back. I hold on to my student ID so I can continue to use it to get a cheaper fare on public transport.

Not long after, I look in the newspaper classifieds and see an advertisement for a recruitment agency that promises 'immediate jobs'. I encourage my girlfriend to go with me, and she agrees. We met at a previous job and she thinks I'm smart for making it to junior college. I don't tell her about the stealing. She's just glad that like her, I'm no longer in school.

True to their word, I undergo a short interview with the recruitment agency and the recruiter tells me that there is indeed a job for me. I'm to go through stacks of documents and void credit cards either expired, lost or cancelled, for \$6 an hour at a bank. It's the most money I've ever made in my life. My girlfriend also gets a job at the same company, but hers is in the mailroom, sorting mail. I sit across from a man in his 40s who constantly makes googly eyes at me while we work, and I tell myself he just misses his daughter. He does this nearly every day

until I finally snap. He makes a complaint to our manager and I find my hours cut. Frustrated, I sign off my last time sheet and stop going to work.

merchandise customer assistance (outdoor)

It's the school holidays, and while some of my classmates have gone on overseas holidays with their family, my parents have never travelled outside of Singapore, so we don't go anywhere. This doesn't bother me, but there is increasingly little to do at home. There are only so many books I can read and websites I can look at. I've done all the dishes and the toilet has been cleaned. I come across a job advertisement in the newspaper, of which there are many in the house. 'NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED' is emphasised, and other than stating it is 'sales' it doesn't say much more. On the listing is an address in an obscure industrial part of town, and I decide to see if the promise made is true, that we can 'make up to \$2000 a month'.

Upon arriving at the location, I find a group of people sitting on hard-back chairs waiting to be interviewed. There is no clear demographic, although many people skew young like myself. After waiting for half an hour, I enter the office with a spiel I'd prepared in my head. To my surprise, before I'm even finished, the manager tells me I'm hired, and proceeds to tell me about the company, a subcontractor for a bigger corporation where labour is outsourced to sell bottles of unbranded perfume to strangers on busy streets.

'Can you start tomorrow?' she asks. 'Yes!' I say, almost too quickly. Heck, that was easy. Two thousand dollars, here I come.

I'm told to meet up with some 'team members' in a busy part of town the next morning, and when I arrive there are boxes

on the ground waiting to be opened. As soon as a headcount is underway, the designated 'team leader', May, opens a box and removes a little party bag from it. From the bag, she takes out a small bottle of perfume. 'This is what we'll be selling today,' she chirps. 'Have a spritz, give it a try, it smells nice doesn't it?' She beams. 'We don't have a quota, because so many of you are new, but try and sell as many as possible. You can do this!' May high-fives us individually before she hands out sheets of paper with the spiel we should use to sell 'the product' printed on it. 'It's really easy,' she exclaims. 'Memorise it. Feel free to improvise. You just need to convince them'.

We are each given tote bags filled with about twenty party bags, with the instruction to return to the meeting spot once we are finished with them to collect more. I walk around the busy streets stopping people with my bag of treats. 'Hi! Sorry to bother you, but have you heard of this brand-new perfume? It's not on the market yet, but I thought you look like someone who'd be special enough to trial this.' I spritz some of the cloying perfume on my wrist, bringing it up to my nose, inhaling deeply. 'Mmmmmm, this smells amazing – give it a try?' Hardly anyone refuses this offer – most take a sniff, usually murmuring their assent.

'Well, it's going to retail for \$100,' I say, spiel ready to go. 'But for you' – I pause – 'For you it will cost \$60. That's our company's special deal for special people like you'. And almost immediately, people whip out their wallets to purchase it. Whoa. It is really that easy. 'Fake it until you make it,' the team leader tells us cheerily. 'You'll be able to move so many units, maybe as much as me, when the time comes'.

I do this job two days a week for the next month. It's a steep learning curve. The probability for failure, of course, increases with the more interactions I attempt. I get snubbed, with some

people being outright rude, whereas others are curious and interested as to what else they can purchase on their weekend shopping trips. I never make more than a couple hundred dollars each week. Two months in, the company gets busted for embezzlement and shuts down. I never hear from them again.

commis chef

I travel half an hour on the slow Adelaide train to get to the shopping centre in Elizabeth where the food stall is located, a suburb some of my friends consider ‘dero’. I’m not sure what that means, looking around warily in case anything untoward happens. But nothing happens and everyone looks normal, with some looking more dead-eyed than those in the inner city. I’m used to this.

The trial shift goes well. I make the Australian version of jianbing – Chinese ‘crêpes’, which I’d not heard of or eaten prior to this – on a hot griddle behind a glass panel, so people can watch their exotic food being made in real time. The Aussie owner ends up hiring me on a permanent part-time basis. ‘We’ll train you,’ he booms.

Everyone working at this stall is a Chinese international student – most are from China and there’s a guy from Hong Kong. Here, the lingua franca is Mandarin Chinese; I find that I have to listen carefully to understand conversations. As always, I’m a humorous novelty: one woman scoffs at me and says that Chinese people should be able to speak Chinese well. I know she’s just speaking her mind, but I find myself at a loss, eyes darting around, trying to connect with these people who are seemingly the most like me in this strange stolen land. ‘We’re all Chinamen’ (‘大家都是中国人’), someone tells me one day,

and while I'm grateful for what appears as acceptance, I'm also confused.

Like everyone else, and under the watchful eye of my manager, soon I'm able to make single crêpes in under two minutes. My manager, Pixie, a soft-spoken woman from Chengdu, congratulates me. 'Are they really like this in China?' I ask. She laughs raucously. 'Of course not! Jianbing is nothing like this. This is fake.'

At this job, we talk about our non-work lives, especially during lulls or while closing up the shop. Some women are impressed to discover I have a white boyfriend. 'How do you find them?' Ivy asks. I find this display of neo-colonialism awkward, but don't have the language to express it without being perceived as even stranger than I already am. Even so, I'm unable to express my feelings or politics in Mandarin. 'I don't know, maybe at pubs? You can come with me if you want,' I venture, unsure of how to answer the question, and not wanting to come across as if I'm hoarding any white-man-acquiring secrets either.

Over time, my wariness surrounding the suburb lifts. It's been six months, and nothing out of the ordinary has happened, even while walking from the shopping centre to the train station after closing time at night. 'Why do people think this neighbourhood is bad?' I think aloud while finishing up a shift with Pixie one day. 'I think it's because the people are poor,' she responds, as she wipes each skillet down. That day my closing tasks involve cleaning the surfaces and the floors. 'Beware of the blacks, though,' she continues, a pointed look cast in my direction. This is when I begin to realise we have little in common, despite my attempts at grasping for sameness through ethnicity. In an attempt to create a distance from Pixie's anti-blackness, I find that I am gradually ashamed to be seen in my co-workers' likeness.

After nine months on the job, I'm given the responsibility of opening up the shop, which causes me to think that perhaps I'll eventually be promoted to manager. But I come to work five minutes late one morning, and the owner finds out. Unbeknown to me, the Aussie women at the sandwich shop opposite have been watching our every move, dobbing us in at any given opportunity. I hear about someone who was fired for taking seven-minute toilet breaks. 'Five minutes can mean a loss of \$50 for the shop,' the owner growls, every word slow and overly enunciated. Pixie and Ivy say nothing as they continue working at the front of the shop. As punishment, the owner docks \$50 off my pay for the week and cuts all my shifts for the next week. 'Go home and seriously think about it! You Chinese people need to be more grateful that we even bother giving you a job in this country.'

I tell my boyfriend after I get home, and he immediately confirms that what the owner had done is illegal. But he is unsure about what I can do, as he'd never had this happen to him before, suggesting that I should ask our friend Simon. Simon's also a staunch union member, so he's seriously annoyed. 'Fuck them in the ass,' he nearly yells on the phone. He becomes even angrier when he asks if they pay me superannuation. 'I don't think so ...?' I respond, somewhat confused. I'd never heard of that term until then.

'That's it. They're fucked.' He outlines all the ways I can approach various organisations, and while it appears daunting at first I navigate all the phone calls and paperwork without much trouble. I'm awash with gratitude for being able to live in a place where employees' rights are seemingly protected. I also feel a sense of undeservedness – what about those who aren't able to find recourse as easily? I do everything Simon tells me, such as claiming back pay for lost wages and reporting the business to

the tax office. During this time the owner texts to say I'm fired before I'm due to receive next week's roster. I'm worried nothing will come out of the reports, but the stolen land delivers to settler-migrant me once again: the owner is forced to pay me a full month's pay on top of backpay and the superannuation he owes me. I'm sure he's been fucked.

professional server

Despite our mutual distaste for the heteronormative-industrial-complex, in which unions are made sacrosanct through acts of (un)intelligibility known as 'marriage', my boyfriend and I decide to jump through the bureaucratic hoops of applying for a partner visa for me. It's the only way I can continue staying on this continent whether I like it or not.

No employer will sponsor me, and I know that going to university as an international student will put me in debt for life with no guarantees. While I gather all the required documents and wait for the partner visa to be approved, I'm put on a temporary visa which stipulates that I can only work twenty hours a week. As a newcomer to both Australia and Adelaide, I don't know where to look. I search Gumtree, but every lunch bar or cafe calls me to do an unpaid one- to two-hour 'trial' then never calls me back. I begin to doubt my abilities. My boyfriend tells me about indeed dot com after one such miserable trial. He works in a retail store selling soap and I hate that he's paying for my food, too aware of the power differential between us – it looks like a white man is supporting his mail-order Asian bride.

On the jobs site, I find a listing looking to hire waiters at the local convention centre. They have an application form on their website, which I take as a good sign. I don't know any locals who

can act as referees, so I call my mates Dan and Simon to pretend to be my ex-bosses. The centre never calls them, and I get the job two weeks after I submit my application. I'm ecstatic. My first Australian job! Coming from a country with no minimum wage laws, \$17 an hour is a shit ton of money. I'm beginning to sound like a grateful migrant, the kind the system loves.

At a paid training session, which feels akin to a school orientation, we play bonding games meant to build and strengthen our ability to work in a team. It's a mixed bag of Australian teenagers and international students from all over the world. The feeling is not unlike socialising at a backpackers' hostel. We're taught to carry a waiter's service cloth on one arm at all times, with the other arm behind our back to indicate that we are indeed professionals in the fine dining arena. We're also taught to carry three plates at once on a single arm, and I watch a supervisor effortlessly carry five.

When it comes time for the real thing, the plates are hot. More often than not, too aware of my inherent clumsiness, I choose to carry two. The supervisor looks on disapprovingly, even though she had said at the training, 'If you can't carry three, then carry two.' Why say something you don't mean? I learn that I have to read between the lines often when talking to Australians, and this is exacerbated in workplaces.

'Do you want to clear that table?' someone asks. Of course not. I don't *want* to do the thing, but I *have* to do it anyway. A French co-worker echoes this sentiment one day, except she says it aloud and it's meant to be cute – for some reason, I know it won't be the same for me.

Three months in at twenty hours a week, I find myself hating the job more and more, the requirement to perform a deferential decorum to business execs grinding me down. How many more galas can I take? I see a co-worker try his hand at four plates,

which ends in tragedy – a lamb shank falls on a lady’s evening gown to result in a loud shrieking. But there’s little option to leave, for I have no idea what my future as a temporary migrant looks like. I’m just glad to have regular income so I can stop relying on the kindnesses of people around me, another privilege in itself. ‘Well done!’ My boyfriend’s loving parents congratulate me, they who never seem to discourage anything. I’m serving the elite their banquet dinners at a fucking convention centre, not teaching at a university. I don’t have a roadmap for any of this.

flatware sanitation technician

I’m filled with insurmountable worry at the thought of not being able to find another job quickly. In Adelaide, unemployment is at an all-time high. The friends I’ve made at punk shows have found jobs through friends, or work proper, qualified jobs I have zero chance of being hired at, especially not with a résumé that’s littered with gaps, not to mention the fact of my foreignness. If engineers and doctors from India and Iran end up working as kitchen hands or security guards, what chances do I have? A friend suggests that I omit my ‘foreign’ work experience from my résumé, replacing it with retail stores, offices and cafes located interstate, the names and locations of which I gather online. Simon and Dan continue to be my referees.

This tactic seems to work, and I am filled with suspicion and disgust at the Australian workforce’s attitudes towards migrants. Why would qualifications acquired overseas be any less credible? I note the irony: I’m not qualified, yet I can’t appear *too* qualified nor *under*-qualified. What if I’d worked for a decade in a professional setting and then had to start all over again?

These people exist; later, I meet other migrants who tell me that they have had to diminish their qualifications in order to get a job – any job – on this ever-dispossessing continent. Engineers become taxi drivers, acclaimed concert musicians become warehouse labourers – attempts at rebuilding a present completely thrown off or stalled.

But I can't not have a job. I apply haphazardly for jobs that I think I can do and am qualified for, despite not intimately knowing the ins and outs of Australian workplaces. Receptionist at the South Australian Country Women's Association. Sales assistant at Salvos. Night fill at Coles. Night fill at Coles. Service cashier at Woolworths. Service cashier at Woolworths. Customer service assistant at Origin Energy. Team member at Bunnings. Housekeeper through the Accor Hotel group. Sandwich shop at the airport. After a month of this, rejection emails filling my inbox, I finally hear back from someone. Thank fuck, I think, because that one bi-weekly life drawing group in Adelaide isn't going to be able to sustain me for the long term.

The call is from the owner of a cafe located in a bustling section of Adelaide's CBD. I agree to go in for a half-hour trial, despite the nagging conviction that they will try to rip me off as has been par for the course so far, the most recent encounter being a three-hour unpaid 'trial' at a lunch bar that never called me back. That owner's routine way of greeting others – 'how ya garn alright?' – remains a stored memory. Yet somehow fortune strikes this time: I do get the job at this cafe. The task is to alternate between washing dishes and putting bread in the toaster. Surely any idiot can do this.

I'm the idiot the cafe anoints, probably only because I lied on my résumé. 'You might be able to get more shifts if you're good,' the owner mumbles before returning to his Greek newspaper. He assumes I came to Australia as an international

student, finished my studies, and then moved interstate for whatever reason. I let him believe this. When I receive my first payslip, I realise I'm hired on a casual basis at \$23 an hour. More than the convention centre! I had not dared to ask.

As a twenty-year-old institution many boomers frequent for breakfast, brunch and lunch, the cafe is endlessly busy. On weekends, the kitchen does more than 200 covers, and I find myself cramming more dishes than I possibly can in the dishwasher, so I can keep up. I work quickly, with my head down, establishing a routine which eventually impresses the chefs. I need to keep this job.

In the kitchen, I get to know two men named Matt, each as annoying as the other. It is only much later that I recognise they bear the quintessential qualities of line cooks: misogynistic chatterboxes with false yet self-righteous beliefs about the world. I learn to respond listlessly whenever they start a conversation – the 'yeah all rights' and 'that's its' rehearsed to a fault. Half the time I'm just moving my mouth like they are. Unlike many of the other jobs I've had, I hear all about the Matts' lives – their 'missus', their dad, what they ate for dinner last night, the TV show they're watching at the moment. And because they enjoy talking, I ask them questions so the conversation doesn't wander to my life. I'm vague about many aspects, and they don't pry: they're just happy to have someone to talk to in a shit job. At the end of the day, we're all here for the same reasons, and will probably work similar jobs for the rest of our shit lives.

During weekday post-lunch lulls, the Matts show me knife skills and other miscellaneous kitchen tricks, excited at the thought of having an unofficial apprentice. At their invitation, I go to the nearby pub with them after work for knock-off beers, only because it seems normal to do so. The feeling is akin

to having completed an initiation. I have passed the test, crossed the line.

At the pub, I'm introduced to Kamara, another line cook I eventually become 'work wives' with after my shifts begin to increase. One of the Matts must have put it up to the owner. Kamara is impressive: loud and almost unhinged, cackling wildly during service – later, she tells me during one of our drunken knock-offs that she was a waitress for years, until the owner found her behaviour displeasing and put her in the back end.

But we never talk too deeply about anything, both at work and at knock-offs, and whenever I get to philosophising about something, both Kamara and the Matts turn the conversation around, as I turn their conversations around when they start telling a story I've heard before. I learn that the more unserious I am, and the more I insult them in return, the more they seem to enjoy my company. I swear more liberally than I ever have, yelling ocker colloquialisms across the kitchen like I've been doing it all my life. They accept me, and it's all I need to make earning my keep a little bit more bearable.

After a year and a half at the cafe, I earn my kitchen stripes, no longer a 'kitchen hand' but a 'cook', with whole stations to myself and eventually running slow periods on my own, something I enjoy immensely. I learn how to dice an onion in seconds and cook an array of pasta recipes by memory; the difference between sous vide and braising, and how long to cook a salmon fillet in the oven for. This will be the longest I will stay in any job, even though I end up saying goodbye to Kamara and the Matts, working at three different kitchens over six years.

Here, I don't flinch nor falter when people ask me what I 'do'. Yet, I feel a strange admixture of embarrassment and irritation when they attribute a sense of glory to my job, their

only understanding of chefery obtained through cooking shows on TV. 'It's not really like that,' I hear myself saying, wrinkling my nose. 'It's menial and often you work with unhappy men who hate their lives.'

It sounds like a self-deprecating statement, but it's not untrue. In the first years I count only three other women out of twenty men as co-workers. At each new joint, I discover I will have to learn to display public aggression so the men will regard me as their equal. Yet the opposite is also true. 'Here comes the feminazi!' says one after I reject his offer to lift a heavy load. We flip meat and poach eggs and make huge pots of sauces; we throw things in the microwave oven even though we know we're not allowed to, make sandwiches, roast vegetables, and come up with specials because the owner tells us to. Sometimes it is simply to alleviate boredom under the guise of 'creativity', so that we can later tell the owner we have come up with something potentially impressive to sell. At knock-off drinks, we groan about non-chefs thinking our jobs are glamorous, but do little spins and tricks at work like we're on *Masterchef* anyway.

All three establishments serve different food, but they could also be the one same job stretching through to eternity. Still, out of all the jobs I've had, I find these cooking jobs satisfactory enough, only because I don't see myself considering calling it quits at the end of each day. That's good enough, isn't it?

My boyfriend and I end up gathering enough means to move away from claustrophobic Adelaide to Melbourne. At this point, my résumé looks less made-up, and I've accumulated actual referees; I find a job as a brunch chef in an inner-city cafe within weeks of getting there. There's also no denying that my East Asian looks and anglophone ways are starting to occupy a more privileged space in Australia, and this is amplified on the east coast. Much like Greek and Italian migrants in the 1980s,

East Asians (or those generally described as ‘of Chinese, Japanese or Korean appearance’) are recognised – through ethnic hierarchies propped up by white supremacy – as hardworking and submissive: the perfect brew in the workplace. I am as inscrutable and as quiet as I can be.

The Fitzroy cafe – a long-time dream of two young dads – ends up being the only business I truly enjoy working at. Going to work in the early dawn, sharing the bus and then the tram with those like myself and those going home after a long night of partying, I find that I don’t dread the next day, even remotely. I get along with the owners of this cafe easily, our shared language as first- and second-generation migrants one of carving spaces that are inhabited truly by ourselves, even if our interests and lifestyles are vastly different. During quiet mid-mornings, Dhiren and I experiment with possible menu items which draw on our favourite foods: chilli scrambled eggs on a bed of roti one day, a sago muesli dessert the next. He introduces me to the best Sri Lankan restaurant in town, with a disclaimer: ‘My mother’s cooking is definitely better, but you take what you can get’.

But good things never seem to last for long. The cafe doesn’t do as well as projected, and Dhiren asks me a month into the job if I’m willing to double up as a server so they can save costs. We are sitting at one of the cafe tables and Nikos, the other owner, is looking quite grave. I’m reluctant to return to the draining emotional labour that accompanies customer service, but I agree – it will mean more shifts, and I do want to help them get out of this rut.

Most days, service is slow: we engage in idle chit-chat or work in near-silence, everyone going through the motions, everyone silently hoping that the business will turn around. The so-called Australian Dream is around the corner! It’s right there! Unlike

the other kitchens I've worked at, there are fewer instances of open misery in this one, fewer insults and riffs. I also want to keep my job, so I use my burgeoning writing connections to wrangle reviews and photo ops for them. I've never felt this kind of protectiveness towards a place of work before; I feel perplexed that I'm even feeling this way, and that it has arrived this late in my working life.

Business picks up, and I start to think that maybe the cafe will enjoy a long life after all. But this is inner-city Melbourne, the land of cafes, all in a competition to outdo each other in their self-same ways – the owners break the news after an especially busy Sunday. They haven't been able to brand the cafe in a way that can consistently attract the denizens of the area, and have been haemorrhaging money for a while. I look at them intently to see if this is all an elaborate joke orchestrated to test my loyalty, but their forlorn demeanour tells me otherwise. Everyone looks like they're about to cry, but no one actually does so. How funny, I think to myself. The job I'm foreseeing myself working in for the long term ends up becoming short-term. Dhiren tells me he will go back to being a sous chef, and Nikos, a cafe manager. This is the kind of unpredictability that accompanies a working life.

crowd manager

I've been in Melbourne a few months. And because I had managed to begin friendships with a small handful of people I'd gotten to know through the writing world when I was still living in Adelaide, there are job opportunities for me. 'There's an opening,' Emily says of this literary organisation. 'You sometimes get to meet famous writers! It's a really easy job – all

you gotta do is to usher event attendees into the venue when there are talks on.'

'It's quite a coveted job,' she adds. 'It's an emerging writer's dream to work there.'

At the time, I have yet to understand the significance of the place as a cultural institution; I'm just happy to have a second job. The interview process, if it is even one, is unbelievably smooth. 'It's about who you know,' as they say. The verisimilitude of this is surprising to me, and knowing that I somehow lucked into it via what feels like a lottery system is even more astounding. For now, I am yet to know anything about the inner workings of this mystifying world, although it will gradually become apparent to me over the next few years.

It really is the easiest job. The pay that arrives in my bank account every fortnight is a constant surprise. The most tedious part of the job goes for something like ten minutes, when you're scanning patrons' tickets at the door with your little handheld scanner. In the absence of the machine you simply tick their names off a printed list. And needless to say, in places where people above the age of 50 congregate, technological illiteracy isn't far off – many patrons stall for minutes, quizzically looking over their glasses as they scroll through their inbox looking for the email that contains the specific barcode they have to show me in order to gain entry. Even though the talks are usually free of charge, the organisation needs to keep a headcount, so that the supervisor can write up reports after the event. Sometimes this check-in process takes an excruciating four minutes or so. I know that I'm not allowed to display even the slightest bit of impatience, so I find myself standing mildly aside, a frozen smile on my face, while I take the time to observe the person's outfit, making sure not to stand too close to their mouth.

The rest of the time sees the other ushers and I standing around listening to the panel, our hands clasped respectfully and at rest in front of our torsos. I'm surprised to find out that we can choose to sit down. Some talks experience a throng so large that people spill out of the small foyer, as they are instructed to line up outside the main entrance. It is under these circumstances, when the supervisor tells us to expect a crowd based on high registration numbers, when we encounter the hardest part of the job: bringing out more stacks of chairs to ensure all attendees are accounted for.

While the repetitive lifting of objects doesn't come as novel to me, I note a novelty that I hadn't experienced in previous jobs, times when the person I'm paired with moves at a much slower pace, not due to illness or disability but because they simply do not sense an urgency at all. A pattern eventually shows itself: they're more often than not people in their early twenties who don't really need the job. Although there are many others like me, who work this job to offset something else, usually a burgeoning arts practice or a creative writing degree, I also meet children of artists and publishing types, whom I assume have been ushered by their parent/s into the wonderful world of publishing. It's an introduction. A kind of paid induction.

In principle, the inequality is vexing, but I also want to get the chairs over and done with. It's especially annoying when the session requires a 'pack down' after: not only do you have to wait for patrons to leave the venue and mingle elsewhere, you'll also be hoping that your colleague for the night works at a similar pace to you. Under fair work laws, it is mandatory that we are paid for three hours worth of work. If we can finish under that time then I can at least be entitled to some senseless satisfaction at having played the system. Maybe I'm the one who's being a brat.

The organisation experiences a staff disruption one day. There's some kind of reshuffling, and other than gossip I'm not privy to any information. I'm not sure what's happening but the pandemic strikes and we're at first paid for a few missed shifts, which I find so generous and insane considering how easy this job is. Should I be happy that the pandemic has created opportunities for me to shirk work and still get paid, or should I be sad that the pandemic's conditions are not enabling me to go out to work and thus get paid? It's a precarious time.

Soon the organisation implodes further and I begin to hear stories about the new top-dog. This feels like something I'm not allowed to know. It doesn't sound like it has anything to do with me either, yet I'm uncertain what this person's presence might imply. Whenever my co-workers and I see her at an event we are working at, our interactions may as well be a non-event: her nodding imperiously at us, dim smile inscrutable – a manner I've begun to associate with the elite. How will this knowledge change my employment? Other than having the luxury to attend literary talks that contain the air of a gala, the work is literally menial. It's made for me, really.

But someone, somewhere disagrees. Not too long after the height of the pandemic, I realise I've stopped receiving the emails the manager sends to all staff each month which we use to communicate our availability. I've been taking as many cleaning jobs as I can do each week so this change is initially hardly noticeable, but a few months pass before I wonder if I actually got fired without my knowledge. But I never know because I never hear from them again. My employment there may as well be a fever dream.

independent contractor

A food delivery app has come to town, and while it is already well-known overseas and on the east coast, little Adelaide has yet to see that development. My housemate, Henry, out of curiosity and a desire to make more money, applies to be a delivery cyclist. ‘You get to explore different parts of Adelaide, exercise and make money,’ he tells me while making dinner one day, after listening to yet another lamentation about my kitchen job. He makes it sound like an okay deal. I already ride my bike frequently, so it seems like a natural next step: getting paid to exercise more while still being able to somewhat dictate my hours.

It’s an easy sign-up, so easy that all it requires is for me to walk into an office building in town to do the paperwork and pick up the special insulated bag to transport the food in. There’s a zippered holder at the bottom for pizzas, so they can lay flat. I’m set! I start working as soon as I exit the building, logging onto the app the staff at the office had already taught me to install in my phone. Adrenaline courses through me; this is a computer game, except I’m playing it in real time.

Henry is right: it’s an okay deal. It’s not the best deal, but it’s good enough. At this job, I make \$8 per drop-off; sometimes I’m lucky and my ‘trips’ from point A to B are 500 metres to a kilometre apart. One job requires me to pick up food from a restaurant below an apartment complex, only to find out that the destination is in the same complex upstairs. Sure, I think to myself, whatever floats your fucking boat. That’s an easy eight dollars.

While the company initially promised a three-kilometre maximum distance for cyclists, the app’s algorithm begs to differ – I end up delivering further and further away from my starting

points. On one delivery, I ride six kilometres down a busy main road known for ‘killer’ trucks with interstate deliveries, my bicycle hugging the road shoulder, my hands gripping the handlebars. The eight dollars is a flat rate that doesn’t increase with distance, unless the app issues a randomised ‘boost’ that multiplies the payment anywhere from 1.1 to 2 times the usual rate. The algorithm makes it such that it’s literally luck; one takes what they can get. Reject too many jobs and you get penalised, the algorithm putting you onto a secret blacklist that ensures you get fewer job notifications. Predictably, these boosts don’t last long, and often appear during harsh weather conditions, which makes the job hardly worth it on a pushbike. Other times, they appear at hours in between mealtimes, where you’re hardly guaranteed deliveries anyway, especially in a city as small as Adelaide. Customers – if you can call them that – are either overly thankful or completely invisible, with many preferring to communicate via the chat function on the app. ‘DO NOT KNOCK!!!! SLEEPING BABY,’ writes one. ‘Please take lift to unit 1107 and place food on ground next to door, thx,’ writes another. The rare times I see another delivery cyclist while at work, we give each other a tiny wave as we pass, both on the way to either a pick-up or a drop-off.

I deliver food like this for a year as a second job. As much as I’m sceptical over its claims to ‘change lives’, I do manage to supplement my income from writing and the restaurant. I can’t complain.

domestic assistant

After the Melbourne café job, I’m back to square one: indeterminably afraid of what the future will hold, paranoid

that no one will hire me. Although I'm making a considerable sum of money writing at this point, it's nowhere near a liveable wage. I have no money left from the interstate move, and credit card debt that looks like it's never going to be paid off. There is still the question of the \$10 000 my friend in Singapore lent me six years ago, which I ended up using.

But I remember I'm back in the big smoke, so I look on the internet again. I'm not entirely convinced about returning to cheffery. Where can I find a job that requires the least interaction possible, where I can be mostly left to my devices? In theory, thinking and interacting should be voluntary endeavours – they shouldn't be done in exchange for something as lacklustre as 'having an income' 'towards survival'.

On a practical level, however, I live in this society. Utopian wishful thinking isn't going to house or feed me. I would rather not do food delivery again if I can help it, so I look at a national job outsourcing app to see if it's any better than the scant offerings I'd seen back in Adelaide.

It turns out that in Melbourne, the app is teeming with 'Posters' looking for 'Taskers', an assortment of one-off jobs filled every day in various locations throughout the metropolitan areas. New jobs appear on the app every few minutes. There aren't many cooking jobs on there, so I look at cleaning. Due to my obsession for order it's one of the things I'm fairly good at, so good it was a point of either praise or contention with many chefs at previous workplaces. It was invariably a virtue or an affront. And Melbourne's five million population delivers: out of the many 'tasks' offered, many happen to be housekeeping jobs. I do well enough to convince a few clients to take me on as their regular cleaner, and my roster of clients begins to expand.

In this job, I get to peer into the intimate lives of the professional-managerial class, they who can afford to pay

people to clean their houses because they'd rather – for whatever reason: lack of time, usually – not do it themselves. I have never known myself or anyone in my proximity to have that kind of luxury. It seems so absurd. It's a job most people can do by themselves! Nonetheless I'm glad that others' ineptitude, apathy, and disposable income are helping pay for my living.

The job is different every day, which imbues its inherent monotony with a sense of adventure. I clean four-bedroom houses in the suburbs, inner-city apartments that resemble hotels, passive income airbnbs, CBD apartments that strike me as akin to boxes if not for the visible city skyline. I clean an open-plan office that also houses a place of residence downstairs, and I fear for the client's mental health because who can conflate work and rest, or at least compartmentalise them, in such close quarters? I clean a gay white yoga instructor's house in addition to his studio around the corner every fortnight. 'I love gentrification,' he tells me, a glint in his eye. I'm sure he also likes the fact that his cleaner is an alternative-looking woman who also happens to be a person of colour. Occasionally, I do the shopping for a young woman who requests that I get the exact same items every week. I clean the family home of an ex-goth with multiple sclerosis, our relationship a kind of paid-for friendship, her talking to me about everything and nothing while I clean. Another client gives me some Aesop hand soap for Christmas. I bid successfully on a \$150 one-off that requires me to dispose of all trash – fast food wrappers, dog shit, junk food packets, rotting half-eaten fruit – from a hoarder's room, with the stipulation that I have to finish the job in an hour. The app becomes a game: every job is a quest and I don't progress to the next level until I receive my five-star rating. I make sure every tap and doorknob gleams.

wordsmith

It strikes me at some point: I'm bored in Adelaide. People seem not to do very much, there's a lot of drinking, and I can't seem to find the right array of people to talk about compelling stuff with. I've already increased my alcohol tolerance, and I'm sick of seeing the same people all the time. Things only really happen on the weekends, and weekday nights are filled with nothing much at all.

It is this under-stimulation that leads me once again to the internet, bearer of opportunities not unlike the trusty classifieds of yore. There, I notice a left-wing Australian publication I e-subscribe to is 'looking for pitches'. I have no idea how to begin, but I follow the instructions and fire off something on their Submittable anyway. 'Dear Editor,' I write. 'I am submitting an essay critiquing the exceptionalism accorded to a particular kind of asylum seeker "approved" in mainstream circles, while hundreds of others remain wilfully ignored. Do let me know if your publication is keen on publishing this. I understand that I am not a subscriber to the magazine, but am happy to volunteer this article unpaid if necessary. Best regards'. For some reason, the editors find it persuasive enough, even though in the bio section I've written 'never published' and have submitted something in the 'non-subscribers' column, which I take to mean would less likely result in acceptance or payment.

When it's published, I share the article on Facebook and Twitter, as advised by the automated email I receive after my submission is approved. I can't believe it. So someone finds my thought vomit interesting enough to read and then also pay me for? Later I find out that I inadvertently submitted something called an 'on-spec', which happens when a writer finishes writing

an article before they are promised any payment for it, shopping it around with the hope that it eventually gets published somewhere. Even though it takes me close to a week to research and write it, I don't feel like I worked for the \$60 payment at all. I was engaged in deep thought the whole time, ruminating about something I want to tell others, things I already do during my leisure time. I mean, it's a serious subject, obviously, but it's nice to be able to argue a case, isn't it? Especially if it's something that's been bugging you for a while and one you can't seem to find much non-academic literature on. I'm hoping to have a conversation somehow.

I get addicted to the feeling. My friends and boyfriend seem encouraging, impressed even. It seems as if it's a job worthy of admiration, many attaching a sense of glamour to it. But I'm only addicted because, like Charles Mingus, I can't and don't ever want to stop thinking, which, as he puts it in his memoir, is 'the only way I can go forward'. Might as well get paid for it.

But I gradually realise I'm not the only person to think this. Duh! The mysterious workings of the publishing world, while becoming less opaque to me as time passes, become more and more perplexing as I come up against more questions than answers. Secrets are held and spilled, private messages rife with grievances and gossip. It is nothing like the world I imagined: comradeship and intellectual exchange often sacrificed at the cost of something else, usually a form of capital even if incomes remain stagnant and the winners take all. Injustices, prejudices and inequalities reveal themselves again and again. Unspoken transactions often occur: you scratch my back and I scratch yours. I begin to see it as a combination of high school and the corporate world: a huge, remote office that runs itself like a subculture, so that yardsticks can continue to change without so much as an explanation even if what we are all doing is

considered a job. Everyone fights for crumbs. Newspapers are funded by fascists. Only the moneyed can keep at it – if at first you don't succeed, try and try again. Yet no one seems to have any money either.

Disgusted, I turn to George Gissing's novel *New Grub Street*, which I'd only heard about after joining the ranks of this establishment, making the reading experience even more pathetic. This atmosphere dissuades me from seeking out more friendships than the ones I already have, once a desired fantasy. Perhaps I had been sucked in by its presumed glamour too; it might be the reason why the literary arts tend to be imbued with an appeal both impenetrable and desirous. How can community be built when transactions are involved? Still, nothing is totally horrible: I occasionally get to know mentors and others whom I admire, whether they are those who have battled these same odds without descending into an inflated sense of self-importance, or those who really do want to champion and nurture writing. They are friendships that I hold on to; the facelessness and remoteness of this job – especially if it is done on a freelance basis – almost ensure alienation otherwise. A close friend and I share a bitter laugh: and to think we thought this would be the greatest job ever – we love reading and writing, don't we? We fucking love reading and writing! And yet. I get to know aspiring poets and novelists who seem to disappear off the face of the earth after a few years, never wanting anything to do with writers and writing ever again. And if I had to learn to read between the lines at my job at the convention centre, here I have to pay even closer attention: it increasingly appears I am now inside the enemy's lair. Not a proletariat, not yet a bourgeoisie, while not making enough money to belong to the professional-managerial class either – a kind of upjumped knight from the George R.R. Martin universe. And contrary to popular belief,

the writing increases in difficulty the longer I do it, which I take as a sign of my ascending the levels of this revolting video game of a life. The chasm widens.

director of first impressions

I find myself going to a cybercafe most days after work to game my pent-up energy away. A friend I met while working at McDonald's also goes there, and he had frequently extolled its atmosphere. The cybercafe – also known as a LAN (Local Area Network) shop – is run by a 30-something dweeb with a penchant for model airplanes and short film directing. I can see that he enjoys the power of being Alpha Nerd amongst the others that frequent the shop.

Having no other fixed routine and little to keep me occupied apart from the retail job, I go there more often, getting better and better at *Counter-Strike* and *DotA*. There are few female regulars at the shop, so the men and boys enjoy my presence, even though I'm bespectacled and not considered conventionally attractive in a Singapore where Japanese and South Korean beauty standards trickle down to dictate the kinds of women considered beautiful. Still, being Chinese, I pass regardless. You take what you can get. Tim, who ends up declaring us 'godsiblings' because of his Catholic upbringing, lends me his World of Warcraft account so I can start a character on it.

'My mother is sick,' Alpha Nerd tells me one evening. 'Are you interested in being the receptionist while I take care of her?' At this point, retail has sucked me dry, and I'm eager for any opportunity to switch occupations. I say yes, almost too

enthusiastically, delirious at the thought of being paid to be there. This is probably the only way I can level up my *WoW* character to Level 70 because I can't afford to keep visiting with my paltry retail pay-cheque. Here, I go back to McDonald's pay levels, but I tell myself that at least I can game and spend time on the internet without worrying about spending too much money – in fact, I am making it!

After Alpha Nerd returns from his leave, I end up being offered the receptionist job on a permanent basis. 'It's rare to find a girl like this. You know the games and you have customer service experience,' Alpha Nerd tells me. He's glad to have a female face at reception, and I know it's because he thinks my presence can get more people (men) to the shop. The shop is open from midday to midnight to satisfy all gamers' routines, so the pay actually turns out to be fine; I can help myself to the cup noodles for sale during mealtimes as well, which helps. More importantly, I get paid to game. I spend more time online, joining groups on LiveJournal and blogging constantly. Between cleaning eczema scabs off a regular's seat, polishing mice and sitting through some of the worst amateur short films ever, I meet Christine on LiveJournal. We hit it off immediately, thanks to our mutual interest in Nine Inch Nails and goth aesthetics. When we eventually meet in person, she takes me to an emo gig at an arts venue in the city, and my mind is blown – I'd never known there to be an underground anything in conformist Singapore. This is where I'll end up making any friends, inserting theory into my day-to-day politics, and learning how to build lasting relationships, albeit awkwardly and haphazardly.

book influencer

It is surely a made-up job. I get to read new books – books that are soon to be published, before ‘the public’ – and decide if they’re any good. For a dollar a word (\$300 each month), I get to display my literary tastes, recommending a book to a sea of infinite readers who will then consider buying the book to read themselves. Really? You can tell people you loved the fuck out of this book and they’ll end up trusting you enough to go out and spend their money on it? That’s an unthinkable responsibility. I’m a book salesman!

Every two months or so, I’m supposed to look through various publisher catalogues to get a sense of what’s coming out. Short of refreshing a book publisher’s ‘Forthcoming’ page every month, I begin a list that notes down the title, author and month of publication so that I can refer to it again later. I also learn that US/UK publication dates differ from what is referred to as the ‘ANZ region’: a book available in the United States may not be distributed in Australia until a couple of months later. The cover, as well, might possibly be different. Size, too. Baffling, I know.

This all seems like a terribly clinical way to approach an enjoyable activity. I also doubt that I can possibly be so discerning or so time-rich that I can go through twenty books before I pick one. This is where I grow to directly understand that there is no such thing as ‘objectivity’ in the media; it all comes down to what I gravitate to, who I consider worthy of attention and how much attention I pay in the first place. It would be impossible to shut myself in day after day with a plan to finish every single English-language book released each month. I’m a book salesman, I guess.

I come up against other obstacles. I'm not entirely used to this style of writing, which is meant to be succinct yet persuasive, organised via an arbitrary formula where it's advised that each paragraph can't be longer than two sentences – a holdover from newspaper-style writing, and a kind of copywriting, if you will. At first, I think my editor is trying to dumb me down, but after a couple more times working with her I realise she's actually training me to write good service journalism, which is a completely different mode compared to creative nonfiction. I mean, duh. But sometimes you have to do the job to even know what the job actually requires, whether it makes sense or not.

I'm having a bloody ball of a time until my editor tells me six months later that it's very likely she is going to be made redundant. The entire department as well, actually. How long had this been going on? Here we go again, I think. More cuts to the arts in this cartoonish backwards continent. I can't seem to find the heart to lambast this ruthless overhaul either, having come from a place where the opportunity was never there in the first place, let alone diminishing. Yet I know this can't go on; it's enough of a backwater for arts and culture to sink further. The old country's influence is strong on the region, its image a beautiful marriage of east and west – neoliberal, neoconservative, feudal, attractive, illiberal. I am beginning to observe eerie patterns, things that look and feel way too familiar.

But it doesn't matter what I think. The job grinds to a halt. I feel sorry for my editor, whom I am just starting to build a relationship with. She still has a job, but it's no longer the same job in the same department. I don't even know what her new job is. Imagine going to work in the same office, with similar colleagues, but your tasks have now completely changed, and not of your own volition either. That must feel weird. I want to reach out, but feel that there may be unspoken boundaries

I should not cross. We've never even met! Perhaps this is just the way it is.

There's a bit of an online ruckus, at least as far as these things go. Some people express solidarity, saying it's a shame. I expect the whole thing to be forgotten fairly quickly, at least as far as these things go. It's a freelance job, where I sign my name on a contract each month, the equivalent of taking on a month-to-month lease in a private rental. What did I expect? The gutting is concerning, but online furore seems to be the most I'm able to do.

But it's often difficult, particularly as a freelancer, to parse or make sense of decisions that routinely occur behind closed doors amongst salaried staff in the arts and the media. A month after the debacle, my editor gets back in touch to say that she is looking for someone to file a book recommendation that month. There doesn't seem to be much notice either. Although I have the choice to reject the commission, I fear that it might lead to no further jobs after this one. After all, I have no idea what is even happening. I don't really understand where any of this is heading, or if it is even heading anywhere, and I sense that directly asking my editor would result in an awkward response, since an explanation wasn't provided in the first place. Is she fighting with higher-ups for the column to stay behind the scenes? I know her department is gone, her job is gone, but ...?

Nevertheless, I file my recommendation for the month and post about it on various social media channels as usual. Readers and colleagues seem happy the column is 'back', but I have no idea if it is. Is it? Should I begin to look at my list for next month? How much time would I have before the next deadline, at the moment still unconfirmed? Two weeks after the column is published, my editor sends me a cheerful email saying that another department head has decided to keep the

column, except I'll now be working under that editor's remit. I'm glad and confused at once. Perhaps this is just the way it is. The nature of freelance work is unpredictable and rife with alienation, the future uncertain and perilous and shot through with hope.

clocking out

I went to work and I finished work and I went to work and I finished work and I went to work and I finished work and I went to work and I finished work.

INFLUENZA

i think / um / you know / you know what I mean / i guess / it feels like / yeah but / what if / i feel like / feel like / it's interesting / i think / um / um / absolutely / totally / sure / maybe this is because / maybe / feels like / i guess / right / incredible to think / if we look at / what if / well / well / i suppose / sort of / kind of / something like / excellent / actually / you know what / i feel like / i think / um / um / um / aah / hahab!

We're in the year 1955. Acclaimed novelist Vladimir Nabokov is on Canadian TV talking about his book *Lolita*.

INTERVIEWER: Mr Nabokov, I gather from what you're saying is that you have no message at all in this book.

NABOKOV: Well I don't feel like I have any special message, and if you ask me whether my own ideas are those of Humbert Humbert, I would say no. I've taken great care

to separate myself from him. A good reader notices that Humbert Humbert confuses hummingbirds with hawk moths! Now, I would never do that, being an entomologist.

Nabokov is speaking in his hybridised accent, occasionally locking eyes with his interviewer as he speaks. At odd junctures in the middle of random sentences, his gaze keeps flitting downwards – what is he looking at? His shoelaces, a lock of hair, a crumb? Then the shot pans out: he's reading off a bunch of index cards! Nabokov, writer of more than thirty books, is fielding questions with pre-written answers.

He hardly shies away from this fact. In his 1973 collection *Strong Opinions*, he writes, 'I think like a genius. I write like a distinguished author and I speak like a child. [...] The interviewer's questions have to be sent to me in writing, answered by me in writing, and reproduced verbatim. Such are the three absolute conditions.'

Some might respond to this reveal with disappointment. Surely the great literary Nabokov has the ability to shoot from the hip, his oeuvre evidence of his big, mysterious brain. It would appear natural to expect an artist to articulate a position that's analogous to their output in a human and less robotic way. But thinking precedes writing, and if we are able to articulate ourselves better in writing it is because we can mull over and edit the things we want to express, a luxury not afforded to speaking.

Nearly seven decades later, we can see that Nabokov lived in an era where the constraints of capital had yet to hit the art and media worlds. There's a reason why the mid-century period was widely considered to be 'the golden age of capitalism', where labour unions were thriving alongside a growing middle-class whose hunger for money, knowledge and leisure was seeing an apotheosis. The Milton Friedman school of thought had yet

to become infectious. Unlike Nabokov, today's writer or artist can barely make those requests, even less so if they are not well-known. An interviewer would most probably laugh in my face, or more logically, pretend to have missed my email, should I ask to see preliminary questions before appearing on a panel.

Still, there doesn't appear to be more writing exploring the ineptitude writers face when public speaking. Surely it's a common problem – some writers are bad speakers. It is certainly one of the reasons we choose to write. It's definitely the reason I choose to write. If I had a choice I'd rather not speak at all. Is it not enough for my writing and art to speak for themselves? I suppose not. The dearth of critical thinking around this topic may be attributed to a prevailing sense of shame: if I'm representing the prototype of the clever writer then it must correspond to the way I present myself in front of a live audience. Instead, there exists a plethora of tips on how to help writers become better speakers. 'Practice makes perfect', plenty of self-help texts attest. Some people have made entire careers out of training artists to familiarise themselves with the art of expert entertainment.

Here are some tips I've personally gathered through the years:

- Speak aloud to yourself enough times in front of a mirror or to your loved ones;
- Chew mint or take beta blockers before you're meant to go on stage;
- Command the space. Be aware of your body language;
- Breathe slowly and intentionally;
- Take half a Valium and a shot of whiskey;
- Tell yourself that what you're saying is a gift to the audience;

- Hum repeatedly to loosen your vocal cords;
 - Find the caffeinated sweet spot between being alert and alarmed;
 - Channel your fear;
 - Say what you think is true.
-

The artist is a symbol of something. We know because we created it. In the now-infamous J.T. LeRoy story, often dubbed one of ‘the greatest literary scams’ in history, Laura Albert initially didn’t intend for her literary ‘avatar’ to make any appearances at all. In fact, when she wrote and published her novel *Sarah*, about a neglected boy who wants his mother’s love so badly he desires to be her, there was no reason to imagine that the book would become a bestseller. The catharsis that was channelled through writing as LeRoy was enough – it was the only way Albert could allow herself to inhabit, express, and re-conjure her trauma, but away from gazes that could be immediately felt and perceived. Albert’s dysphorias made use of the image of LeRoy as a proxy to render a fictional reality.

What transpired at the beginning was rather lovely, but turned out to be short-lived. Albert-as-LeRoy had already been in touch with cult literary authors such as Dennis Cooper and Bruce Benderson, first through her agent and then via Cooper himself, people who helped her get her writing published in various well-known outlets before *Sarah*’s release. And even though these figures had never met Albert, some were happy to help her organise launches post-publication, probably excited at the prospect of having discovered a hidden talent. At these, fans

arrived and read in LeRoy's stead, relishing the opportunity to stand in front of a crowd narrating a piece of writing which they so very loved. Albert did press interviews entirely via phone or email. But as the author gained more readers, a public demand surged: even if LeRoy emphasised a pathological shyness as the reason why 'he' couldn't appear in public, it was a non-issue, for fandoms crave seeing talent in the flesh. There was already speculation that 'he' was Cooper, whose novels contained troubled teenage boy characters that resembled LeRoy.

We have to see it to believe it. It was under these circumstances that LeRoy was pressured to make a public appearance. The solution was found in Albert's androgynous, gender nonconforming sibling-in-law Savannah Knoop: this reinvented avatar would read under a table, with iconic sunglasses on, in front of a packed auditorium in Italy to receive a standing ovation afterwards. Albert would be somewhere in the midst at these events too, but in a disguise as well. The duo would operate like this for several years. At a Cannes press conferences for *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, a film adaptation of LeRoy's second book, Knoop-as-LeRoy would mumble, incoherent, but it hardly mattered: 'they couldn't understand what he said, they were just riveted' by 'his' celebrity. Accordingly, even when Knoop misremembered important biographical details, the audience would assume that it was simply part and parcel of a prankster persona LeRoy was in the midst of cultivating. Knoop would also see people they personally knew when they signed autographs in Albert's stead, but those people never recognised them.

A year after her identity was finally exposed in 2005, Albert recalls in an interview that after *Sarah* became a bestseller, magazines wanted more photos, even though her publisher had paid to use 'a photograph of a teenage boy who looked a lot like

JT and got permission to run it as the author photo'. 'I knew I needed to supply a body,' Albert says.

This entire business may very well be a cautionary tale about projection and expectations. Do artists have to be celebrities before they are respected? How much and how often do we have to offer an image of ourselves in order to satiate a faceless audience's curiosities and fantasies? As the late multidisciplinary cultural critic Dubravka Ugrešić has written, 'The aura of glamour is, it seems, reserved for those public activities which create the illusion that everyone has the same access to it'. We can see how the artist's image, then, forms a part of the cultural mythos surrounding the so-called democratisation of art. Ugrešić continues: 'A media intellectual will be paid for promoting the illusion that we, ordinary people, think about this or that issue the same way he, the clever one, thinks. [...] The media intellectual will have to accept the consequences of media engagement, namely that it is not the message that matters, but the messenger.'

Although it was television that Ugrešić was referring to at the time, the hyper-normalisation of social media has made it such that this type of image transmission has become simultaneously pedestrian and bizarre. It is an unavoidable (and sometimes even unimpeachable) fact: to be an artist in the age of social media is to make your self into a consumable product, so that not only can you shift units, you get to be able to continue to do the work.

On image-centric arenas such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitch and TikTok, as well as text-based ones like Substack and Twitter (it's really a matter of inclination), some artists are personalities first and foremost: legions of stans providing affirmations in the comments, every word lapped up, gaffes possibly defended to the teeth. Sometimes these figures – if they have gained traction early enough during the platform's

beginnings, as in food writer Alison Roman on Substack – are heralded by the platform itself as an exemplar of how it has ‘helped’ the artist gain new followers and unlock new markets. And now you yourself can do it too! Viewers learn to look forward to new drops, which is not unlike anticipating the next episode of your favourite TV show; relationships and personas are scrutinised just as a TV character’s are. It helps if their friends or partner(s) are other artists, which creates a sense that we are participating in a cinematic universe made up of various players.

What happens next? Even if hypervisibility can bring about necessary change, such as when a celebrity uses their platform to speak out against political injustices or amplify urgent social justice causes, an overabundance of attention – especially if they are just starting out – has the propensity to prevent an artist from flourishing. In some circumstances, artists find themselves cornered: trapped within the very image they have created for themselves, eventually finding themselves caught within a tempest of backlash after attempts at reinvention, inundated not only by their loyal followers but also by once-friendly institutions who may believe that a (market) betrayal has been committed. The work, then, transforms into an ongoing effort to maintain the established image.

It isn’t difficult to see how this is an updated version of the idealised image political actors have used to project themselves outwards in the last century. These are often designed to create a devoted and loyal following so as to maintain power in what Gilles Deleuze defined as control societies, a stage of capitalism that ‘is no longer a capitalism for production but for the product, which is to say, for being sold or marketed’. When Deleuze figured this out in 1992 however, he had no idea how this was going to pan out over the ensuing thirty years. Maybe he didn’t want to; by 1995 he was dead. Nevertheless, what he

had observed has only seen its grip tightening in our algorithm-driven era, particularly as machinations are obscured and complex for the layperson to comprehend even as ‘freedom’ is frequently uttered in the same breath.

‘The audience is on your side,’ a friend told me once via email. I was interviewing her about her writing practice, and I had added a question asking for tips on public speaking, which she is very good at. Of course, I think to myself when I receive her answers. This makes sense. As someone else had told me a year prior, the audience’s role is to learn from us. Why would they want to see me fail? Unless ...?

I think about the silences that erupt out of uncertainty, that feeling of being ‘tongue-tied’ that materialises out of facing an audience with different expectations than mine. Even their attire is distinct – surely they did not purchase that vaguely professional outfit in an op-shop, the one they put on before going to see a doctor to get more diazepam prescribed, the one ‘look’ they cobble together for any event that seems remotely ‘formal’. A good failsafe method that others before me have applied is to be ‘quirky’, a way to deflect differing class and race positions by assuming a no-fucks-given, funny Every Man. Just that little bit of zaniness, you know? Make the audience laugh (make them comfortable)! Help them empathise. Alternatively, we can help them relate.

‘Practice makes perfect.’ That peculiar axiom again. I practise in front of a mirror and imagine myself an actor, a piece of advice I receive from a friend who works as a teacher. You’re just preparing what to say to others, to give others the same impression of that self you yourself see within yourself. By

acting on stage, I can then most be myself. Some may say I'm suffering from that universal affliction – 'impostor syndrome' – but I don't know who I'm supposed to impersonate. Celebrity mind, main character energy. Doesn't matter what you call it, the compulsion is the same – to be seen and validated and then what? I'm not an actor. I don't want to do this.

In Soraya Roberts' essay on the failings of so-called public intellectuals such as Naomi Wolf, Fareed Zakaria and Jill Abramson, she writes about the inevitable farce that's usually a consequence from mass expectation: heroes must fall. When artists and scholars are naturally touted as lodestars, assigned an arbitrary value while being put on pedestals and judged around ever-shifting notions of 'taste', usually assembled from a coterie of what constitutes an 'inner circle' made up of those from the middle and upper classes, slip-ups are bound to occur. As Roberts writes, 'The public intellectual once meant public action, a voice from the outside shifting the inside, but then it became personal, populated by self-serving insiders'.

'To be honest, we want them around,' Roberts goes on. 'Media output hasn't contracted along with the industry, so it's easier to follow an individual than a sprawling media site, just like it's easier to consult a YouTube beauty influencer than it is to browse an entire Sephora.' In our now familiar and amnesia-facilitating attention economy, many people would more likely prefer to leave it up to their anointed prophets to help them make up their minds, or at least steer them in a direction that they would prefer to follow. Who is more eloquent, more charismatic, more attractive, more sincere and/or self-deprecating, held up as a standard for others to aspire to, to mock, to scrutinise, to believe in? When the Greeks, as part of their civic duty, were speaking to the public in ancient Athens, the ones who spoke best and most convincingly had

prominent social lives. If they didn't come from wealth, that was easily fixed: good speaking skills were essential for mixing with the wealthy. In this way, value continues to accrue. And it is here that the parameters can remain shady, which allows for a free market of faith – whoever is most convincing receives the most followers. Edification, adification.

In order to 'sell' your work, one has to appear personable in the way that an audience might find endearing. It is a kind of relatability exercise, yet it has to be packaged in a way that gives off a sense of novelty as well. This may not be a conscious act, for it is entirely contingent on how one is perceived by others, how your gestures are parsed and understood, whether you have happened to emerge in the public arena during a particular cultural zeitgeist. One such person, Tavi Gevinson – who catapulted to fame as a fashion blogger in her pre-teens during the late 2000s, and then later through her role as founder of indie teen publication *Rookie* – lays the conundrum bare in a profile in *The Cut*:

And yet the rapid-fire stage-mom math I performed in curating my various Instagram accounts was likely instrumental to the presentation of my authentic self that would eventually lead to branded-content deals, acting roles, and my career as I now know it. Rather than some tamped-down impulse, my ability to control how I was seen, to know what to say (and when, and how), was maybe never switched off but an instinct like any other, dovetailing with the many conscious and unconscious decisions that made up all my acts of self-expression. After all, I had been honing my shareability lens for many years before Instagram and already received much praise for 'being myself'. Somewhere along the line, I think I came

to see my shareable self as the authentic one and buried any tendencies that might threaten her likability so deep down I forgot they even existed.

These days, Gevinson outsources the labour of Instagram updates to an assistant. Of course, while she unfortunately had to experience her coming-of-age in public, there are many other ways to present yourself to an infinite audience. Take original sad girl novelist Ottessa Moshfegh, who launched her latest novel *Lapvona* at the fashion house Proenza Schouler, which had also commissioned her to write a series of diary entries about nothing ('I went to my office and shut the door and read a book. I didn't check my email or answer the phone. I need to do that more often'). Published in *A Magazine Curated By*, a designer fashion magazine that describes itself as one which 'explores the universe of a chosen fashion designer [...] to develop innovative, personalised content to express their aesthetic and cultural values', Moshfegh's diary entries can be regarded as an elevated 'A Day in the Life of'. It bears noting that this was not Moshfegh's first foray into the world of haute couture, having walked down a major runway in late 2022 for the designer Maryam Nassir Zadeh. *Vogue* reviewed that show, saying that the pairing was essentially perfect: 'Both women have a shared affinity for character building and quirk: nothing normal happens on an MNZ runway or in a Moshfegh novel'. A quick search online reveals that a t-shirt retails for \$260, and a blouse, \$460.

Closer to the present, novelist Allie Rowbottom threw book parties in early 2023 to celebrate both the hardcover and paperback launches of her novel *Aesthetica*, about a woman who goes through an experimental procedure to reverse the extensive plastic surgeries she underwent while in the quest to establish herself as an Instagram model. One of the parties included a pay-

what-you-want Botox station as well as a video appearance by literary influencer du jour Caroline Calloway. The market loves it when things get meta. In an article that acts as a celebration of the ‘Literary It Girl’ in *Nylon*, Rowbottom is quoted as saying, ‘Make it fun and get people hyped about the book in tried-and-true ways, because then they’re going to be curious about what’s inside’.

The confluence of digital media and influencer culture has led to a desire for a kind of mundane knowledge that buttresses this economy of images bought and sold, where a cultural worker’s output is evaluated on the image of that same output. It is not unlike the more business-y iteration, the ‘thought leader’, whose popularity surged alongside the rise of Silicon Valley. Think the TED talk, where personalities across the tech, entertainment and design worlds are invited to pontificate about their ideas for the future, or when tech kingpins self-style as renegades and visionaries. Indeed, why does Jensen Huang of NVIDIA fame always wear a leather jacket? Why did Steve Jobs always wear blue jeans, white running shoes and a black turtleneck?

That was the prelude, anyway. This type of public relations game is now played by people with platforms both large and small. It is Bill Gates’ ‘friction-free capitalism’ come to life, where consumers’ desires are met directly without the presence of intermediaries. He did predict something, I guess. In the artistic and literary worlds, I’d argue that the pressures around self-image are an offshoot of what Dwight McDonald famously coined as ‘masscult’ and ‘midcult’: ‘it may be stimulating or narcotic, but it must be easy to assimilate’. The difference between the two, according to McDonald, is the latter’s

inherent ambiguity, which give off an air awesome enough for the educated classes to consume while not encouraging their insecurities about their own perceived ignorance.

This has materialised in the ‘summer reading’ or ‘beach read’ genre, a middlebrow rebranding of the ‘genre novel’, which is generally regarded as trashy amongst a middle-class book-reading public. Lonely women seeking love, conducting affairs, bored at work, trapped within an eternal existential crisis. Perfect for your book club! In the introduction to *Books for Idle Hours*, a riveting investigation into how that genre saw a rising popularity beginning from the late nineteenth century as more and more women entered the workforce and thus gained financial independence, Donna Harrington-Lueker observes as such: ‘By schooling readers in the performance of the new leisure – what to see, what to say, what to wear, what to do – summer reading played a significant role in shaping that middle-class identity, at times even offering a critique of the emptiness of elite leisure practices and confirming the primacy of more sober middle-class values’.

You may want to call this the recommendations industrial complex. It is becoming increasingly commonplace that people would love to know what writers and artists eat, put on their faces, the books they’re reading, the music they love – even if those things have absolutely nothing to do with the art they create. After Jia Tolentino – who was marketed as ‘what Susan Sontag would have been like if she had brain damage from the internet’ – published her bestselling essay collection *Trick Mirror*, we learn that she enjoys a particular miso–almond cookie from a boutique Japanese bakery in midtown New York (‘where I go 95 per cent of the time after leaving the office’), was really enamoured by Liu Cixin’s *Three-Body* trilogy, that her ‘biggest problem’ is a specific fifty-dollar cleansing oil

(‘... it’s so expensive. Kill me’). We know a fair chunk of her life trajectory: she grew up in Houston, Texas, went to a school that was attached to a megachurch, joined the Peace Corps after college and was posted in Kyrgyzstan, went to grad school to study fiction writing, is married to an architect named Andrew, and so on. One review of *Trick Mirror* said she ‘could be the Joan Didion of our time’. Upon the book’s release, every publication in the New York and wider media world was clambering to profile her.

It is easy to reach for Sontag and Didion when thinking of the artist-as-influencer. They are symbols of glamour – entire generations of writers, aspiring or otherwise, have made themselves in a fantasy of their images even if writing and art-making are no longer viable careers in the way that they were for Joan and Susan. Perhaps that is the allure. An image of a martini next to a laptop in a dimly lit room, the edges of a Big Book slightly visible; images that give off an aura of, per Ugrešić, ‘*hip, cool, mega*’ (italics hers).

Fittingly, ‘cool’ was an adjective often applied to a living Didion. When she died in late 2021, many of her belongings and personal effects were auctioned off to the public via an estate sale. Her (broken, Cartier) desk clock had a relatively modest starting bid of \$100, but ended up being sold for \$35 000. Her collection of beach shells and pebbles went for \$7500. There were her well-loved Le Creuset dishware (‘more than \$14 000’), her iconic faux tortoiseshell sunglasses (‘expected to fetch several hundred dollars but sold for \$27 000’), her collection of unused, blank notebooks (\$11 000). Although her handsome maple writing desk was estimated to be worth around \$10 000, it sold for six times that. A stack of books from her library? \$24 000. While I was looking up specific prices for this auction, I notice a 2015 *Elle* article featuring ‘six outfits inspired by Joan

Didion', with a suggestion for some 'interlinked bangles' that cost nearly \$4000 to buy. Even if the proceeds from the estate sale were eventually donated towards Parkinson's research and for a scholarship for women in literature, it's difficult to ignore the acute irony, which Martin Jaeggi notes now serves as a particular driver of popular culture: 'The star no longer helps to sell a product of the entertainment industry, for now the star is the actual work, their persona is a work of art'. Perhaps we are now simply having to sell our own representations in order to live.

I'm not implying that these artists sought to manipulate their image. What's clear here is that the fault is not theirs. Artists and writers are summarily imbued with an aura of power bestowed to us by others' tastes, mostly dominant ones already decided by the tenets of the wider marketplace. The nature of this labour has always been shaped by audience expectations. It's no secret by now that this peculiar ecosystem requires one to have access to prior economic and social capital in order to get ahead, and the current economic instability we are encountering means that art and media workers are more often than not encouraged to commodify their personality such that we are in full control of our own images in a time of deep unpredictability. No one can take away your followers, so goes the belief. It is an empire you have built for yourself.

People will take and interpret how they will. One can argue that Artist A is much more talented than B, but this stops mattering if the latter is more willing to cast it in a marketing sheen, so it now turns out that the perception of talent becomes

subjective, based on the fallacy of the objective. Pre-millennium, there were many more opportunities for the old avant-gardists – who, mind you, didn’t even call themselves that – to be able to choose to work for a niche audience who understood what they were trying to do, and came along for the journey, therefore removing the prerequisite to convince and entertain. But the avant-garde has been subsumed by capital too. As Lucy Sante recently wrote, ‘An avant-garde needs a scene, and the cities are too expensive for scenes now. An avant-garde needs an excess of time, and that’s in short supply nearly everywhere’. Do you see what I mean? And now we’re back to the original location of the haunting.

We are living in a time of what Mark Fisher calls the ‘Celebreality’. This is defined by ‘the simultaneous desublimation of the Star and the elevation of “the ordinary”, and where ‘we’re asked to “identify” with the fantasising object itself’. This was, of course, encouraged by the reality TV industry, but the ‘friction-free’ internet has made it such that it also serves as an excellent proxy for parasocialisms. It’s safe to admire people from afar, whether we want to be like them or if they simply fill us with awe. I want to see you win! We can also choose to obsessively hate on them, just as one would towards a despised TV show character, an arbitrary disdain often containing an underlying projection that only the hater themselves understands, an inversion of the fandom. I want to see you fail! It helps, as well, if our representations keep us financially afloat doing that thing we want to continue doing, which the structures of capital somehow do not allow if you aren’t stuffed to the gills with capital in the first place. So we will now go in search of capital in order to reach this ever-distant zenith.

In *On Television*, Pierre Bourdieu considers something he calls ‘fast thinking’, a posture whose prevalence is attributed to TV audience ratings, which has resulted in things having to be done in a hurry. To Bourdieu, fast thinkers are ‘the people whom you can always invite because you know they’ll be good company and won’t create problems. They won’t be difficult and they’re smooth talkers’.

Put next to computer and phone screens, the television screen no longer retains the same relevance as it did for Bourdieu. Although audience ratings can be likened to audience engagement on social media, the television is not a ‘friction-free’ instrument, its modalities made up of a revolving door of agencies, executives, middle-people, whatever. Yet, as the original representational screen, the principles that make up its foundations continue to inform how we engage with screens, especially as old and new forms of media now feed into each other in spectacular ways. We stream, we scroll, we spectate, we like, we stan. As Bourdieu notes, ‘If television rewards a certain number of fast thinkers who offer cultural “fast food”, it is not only because those who speak regularly on television are virtually on call’, where ‘the list of commentators varies little’.

You know it when you see it. I would name some people in the Australian arts and media landscape, but it might very well result in a defamation suit. Much like the TED talk, nothing necessarily needs to be said. Nothing particularly interesting, or important, so long as you are able to make it appear as if you have illuminated something for others even if you’re merely repeating the same thoughts over and over. It’s a formula of sorts. There will always be loyal fans, new markets. In *The Dictionary of Received Ideas*, Flaubert’s satirical encyclopaedia written to skewer French society at the time, he names ‘art’ (‘Leads to the

workhouse. The arts are being replaced by machines which can do the job better and more quickly’) and ‘fanfare’ (‘Always resounding’), amongst a slew of hilarious examples, some of which like the above continue to be received ideas today. People need to believe what they want, feel what they need to feel. They *did* bother to give you their attention in the first place. You are selling your personality and your mythology and this is how your art accrues value.

I recall a conversation with a fellow Southeast Asian writer about how writers shouldn’t feel obligated to be perceived as public speakers. They agreed, and we spent a few minutes commiserating about how fucking awful a spectacle it is. Why should we be expected to explain our work back to gawking audiences? What was particularly insidious for the likes of us, too, was the fact of our unbridgeable socioeconomic differences. We recognised that our very life stories are what make the book-reading public sympathetic to us in the first place. And while we may have gained some level of social capital, having been recognised as Writers, the forms we choose to use, the ways in which we speak and/or behave, the value we place in books having literally saved our lives – these will always trail us. Which is to say: we may move around in similar arenas, but we are not the same. We are not – or better, refuse to be – habituated into doing that tongue-slapping-the-roof-of-the-mouth sound during pauses, which Brandon Taylor once delightfully identified in a short story as ‘tongues kissing the roof’.

I was grateful for that articulation. Writers should not be expected to perform like monkeys. My friend sighed. They wished it was so simple. When we have to rely on speaking gigs

to bolster the paltry income one receives from writing, it's better off not reminding yourself of this absurd reality. Evasion is bliss. 'But you have published two books, won so many prestigious awards,' I say, at the time still relatively naïve to the machinations of the publishing industry. 'Well, yes, but I still need to send money to my parents,' they replied.

This dynamic could very well be considered a form of patronage between artists and their audiences. In the intervening eras before the nineteenth century, artists were often sought after by patrons themselves, who would commission them to produce work that bolstered their own status and promoted the themes they wanted to see, until that started to change around the turn of the twentieth century, where individual expression was urged as a matter of course even if we are still working for funders and backers who may not necessarily approve of your politics should you decide to make them explicit. This type of implicit censorship has only been made increasingly evident as capital accelerates. But the reasons for patronage remain similar, particularly as corporations and governments have also become involved. There are now intermediaries such as Patreon and Ko-fi (to name but two) to help facilitate a more friction-free exchange. As someone who is used to living paycheque to paycheque, there was a period during the height of the pandemic where I found myself very close to being completely broke. There was only so much writing I could churn out, while my non-writing day jobs had dried up due to the lockdowns. Desperate, I turned to Ko-fi, asking if people could help with 'buying me a drink or a coffee'. Twenty-four hours after I had tweeted about my circumstances, I found myself earning close to \$1500. This work, as can be seen through all the examples I've given throughout, remains gendered and racialised, and always mediated through class.

Whether you want to refer to this model of labour as ‘hope labour’, ‘visibility labour’, ‘aspirational labour’ or something else, as academics have attempted to describe over the last couple of decades, the reality is that this labour requires a certain posture. Identifying ‘zaniness’ as ‘speak[ing] to a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and working’ in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai continues to define it as ‘this politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and labouring’. I’m sure you can see what I’m moving towards. Maybe it’s not fame that people want; maybe we just want to be able to keep doing it.

As Robin James notes in their Substack post ‘What is a Vibe?’, vibes are ‘the instruments the culture of speculative finance capitalism uses to connect status-laden people to status-laden cultural objects and practices’. To give off a ‘vibe’ then – which is to say, to willingly participate in the pursuit of visibility on the image-driven marketplace – is now increasingly tangential to how writers and artists earn their keep. Refuse, and it’s a sure road to obscurity, no one ever knowing what you’ve done, what you look like, never giving anyone a chance to foist an image onto you via the image you emit. One way to escape this is to simply work another job, so the requirement to chase more opportunities becomes less necessary. Indeed, if I can simply appear on a stage for ten minutes (\$200) or one hour (\$500), then it would seem that the alternative – spending months on end, sometimes even years, writing a short story, essay, or poem, making a painting, et cetera – pales in comparison. I’d speak

for less than an hour at an event that was part of a festival in a different city the organising body had paid to fly me to, putting me up in a 5-star hotel I can't personally afford. Is this what this life is like on a regular basis? The A-list keeps the score.

Even if it doesn't make sense to see Moshfegh on the runway or critical race studies scholar Gayatri Spivak as a model for the luxury skincare brand Aesop, it's still a full vibe. To make art is to find connection away from money and prestige. Or so you'd hope. It is to have the freedom to express yourself collectively and in private, to find the addressees. We can only hope they appear.

THIS UNSKILLED LIFE

I've often thought about the many sacrifices I've made in order to allow myself a writing life. Why? The time I met up with a desperate woman at 7am, every day for a week, in a carpark, in her car, so that she could insert a syringe near my abdominal area to harvest my very fertile 24-year-old eggs so I could be reimbursed the \$4000 she stuffed in an envelope at the end of our experience, her gaze averting mine. The time I enrolled myself in medical studies that would give me a few thousand dollars in one go after staying inpatient at a facility for a period of six to twelve days each time, where I'd be woken up every day at dawn to have my vitals checked, then watch as the nurse put an as-yet-untrialled-on-the-market drug into me. In exchange, I simply had to report any effects.

What else? The times I quit casual job after casual job after realising that each one resulted in a severe inability to do the writing I thought I could do with the money, and time I'd

find myself with after performing various types of so-called ‘unskilled’ labour, which even though didn’t require much brain work resulted in sinking depressions that made every piece of writing I attempted an absolute piece of garbage. It is, as philosopher Tobias van Veen once wrote, ‘an emotional economy of stress’, referring to the relentless on-call conditions of precarious labour.

If only the hamster wheel could come to a stop. I recall the time I signed up to work as a food delivery cyclist via a now-ubiquitous, very contemporary and neo-feudal corporation that crowed the benefits of ‘being my own boss’ so that I could manage my time however I needed, and then perhaps work towards a possibility: to pursue writing as a serious career – or as it’s said, a ‘thing’. I’ve never had a full-time job. I very nearly didn’t finish high school. I didn’t come from a family of art enthusiasts or even readers. Growing up, the only bookshelf that existed at home was my own. Other libraries were, of course, at the library, and at school. But we’ve heard too many of these sob stories; after all, we have seen how easy it is to leverage pain as a kind of currency. Attempts at pleasure are much harder to capture. We have seen how easy it is to mine the guilt that is seeded inside so many from the creative classes – gifting a story in which the protagonist rises against all odds to do the very thing she wants to do, happily ever after. The end. What an underdog! A success story that every one loves, because in giving these stories life there exists the hope that meritocracy exists in a society filled with corruption and crime. That childish adage: ‘believe in yourself’, and everything else will follow – with enough hard work, with enough sacrifices. I was quite simply often in the right place at the right time, a bumbling oaf, lucking out. People pitied me. Crucially, I didn’t have anyone else’s survival to prioritise.

It was this reckless sense of futurity that engendered an

endless tumbling into vortexes that resembled nesting dolls, an obstinate refusal that was perhaps born of western individualism. Maybe she's born with it; maybe it's autism. To pursue a passion, a hobby with such deep intensity that it clouded my unconscious before I even knew what was happening.

And now it seems I've made it: I've moved to a place where creative endeavours and freedom of expression are frequently encouraged (at least, opposed to where I'd come from). Through this I made my first career materialise out of seemingly nothing. Perhaps I co-opted myself, to do the very thing I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing, so it wouldn't feel like work. It results in what Mark Fisher describes as 'the loneliness and agony experienced by those who have been projected out of the confining, comforting fatalism of the working-class community and into the incomprehensible, abhorrently seductive rituals of the privileged world'. In the late 2000s Didier Eribon wrote an entire book about this irreconcilable tension: 'two different worlds ... and yet which coexist in everything that you are.'

It is a kind of self-congratulatory lament. I can see how this type of outcome is also much more feasible for those, like me, who possess the terrible bonus of being an English speaker very clearly a product of empire. Check out the masthead in this fucking literary journal! I'm sailing on a ship. I went to a bookshop once the first issue was published, with my boyfriend, picked it up from the display and turned to that introductory page with the ISBN number and such – which I now know is called a 'colophon' – smirking and pointing at my name. I put the publication back on the shelf. I still don't have a subscription.

But here's something else. A client once expressed acknowledgement of my post at said literary journal after I'd cleaned her apartment. She brought it up as a non-sequitur, as if it was something she had planned to say all day. I don't know how she

found out, if this was something she discovered on purpose or if it was a matter of accident. I smiled tightly, hummed an uncomfortable assent. I couldn't deny it, obviously, thinking that I should have used a pseudonym in the first place. But it wasn't like this was something I could have predicted, either. She asked if she could pitch. Of course, I said, switching to that simpering, insincere, slightly breathless tone that marks the day-to-day speech of so many from the creative classes, making sure to look her in the eye. I was serious. But something changed between us then. She never pitched. We never spoke about it again. I still clean her apartment, but less frequently, now.

In grant applications and general writing-world-adjacent activities, I end up referring to myself as a 'working-class writer'. It seems rather disingenuous. Of course my life's work is influenced by not having money; of course my life's work is structured by not having led a linear path in life, not ever making more than \$40 000 in a year. Sixty, one year, when I learned to play the grants system lottery, with most of it having gone into this book. A couple of years ago, I participated in the process of applying to live in a new rental property for the first time in the state of Victoria and realised that if I wanted to not be read as a liability I'd either have to make it seem like I was relying on my partner for financial support or gather enough false documents to seem as if I was living a normally employed life. At the time I had to my name only one rental reference from the state of South Australia, and we already know this continent doesn't bother with credentials from elsewhere. And even though this is all strictly for the purposes of these rental applications and untrue, I went with the latter. Like

many others my age without inheritances and safety nets – the opposite of what Lauren Carroll Harris accurately describes as the ‘future rich’ – I will probably be moving from one sharehouse to another for the rest of my life.

Here’s the contradiction: if one were to situate my circumstances within the creative classes I *am* struggling, but within my very life itself I don’t see it as a struggle, more a constant stream of annoyances that make me want to drop out even harder from the world. I did grow up in a rich country, and I moved to a rich country. Forty grand a year is a lot of money in Indonesia. It’s what primary school teachers and entry-level data analysts earn in Singapore. I’m sure it’s only a little bit less than my parents’ combined income when I was growing up. By virtue of literacy, an endless well of curiosity, racial capitalism, even – surely – I’ve been recognised and anointed by the very institutions I despise. Where is that one coveted grant that will prevent me (us) from ever working again, so that I (we) can lie in bed and read books for the rest of my (our) days? Perhaps, as is the popular internet colloquialism, I have completely ‘normalised’ this way of existing and it’s actually fucking brutal. But how would I know? I am still in the midst of doing it, and I have to keep finding ways to continue.

There are some ways. The search for these ways, however, involves a kind of cruel optimism, a way of thinking that requires you to tell yourself that two opposing things can both be true. When Lauren Berlant writes that ‘one makes affective bargains about the costliness of one’s attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition’, I find myself sighing with relief. I can continue to do a whole bunch of odd jobs (which include domestic cleaning, cat-sitting, editing, events ushering, copywriting, and other things I don’t care to name) to bolster the income I receive from

writing. And thanks to the attenuating effects of the global pandemic that has just wrecked the world, there are many hospitality jobs going around now. I can choose to work alone, even if it deepens the alienation that comes with this increasingly atomised life. In this way you can expect to be a CEO of a ‘small business’. It sounds good – people nod approvingly at parties when it’s time to make small talk. I’m my own boss! Imagine that inherent paradox that can’t even be teased apart, like an electron: you’re working almost all the time, you aren’t getting paid fairly but you get to call the shots, and your main priority is to grow, grow, grow. Unlike a factory, however, art cannot subject itself to a churning process. How does one quantify meaning? We have seen how intimacy is simultaneously deformed and transformed by money. We can conclude that the wage relation is ultimately a form of exploitation.

In the 2020/2021 financial year I received around \$32 000 to continue developing a ‘work in progress’, i.e. the book you’re reading now. When I was growing up, my parents constantly reminded me that I’d ‘never get rich’ from reading. But I felt inconsolably rich, so rich that, to borrow from fellow essayist Eda Gunaydin, ‘I was like a drunk at a bar buying everyone else a round’. I was literally buying rounds, buying nice things, throwing money at friends and strangers whom I thought needed it, not thinking about what was going to happen later. It was my turn to give back, wasn’t it? I bought a \$500 massage gun. A \$150 pair of fluffy house slippers. I didn’t think twice about giving money towards crowdfunding campaigns. I put twenties and fifties into multiple paper cups and upturned hats. Like Gunaydin, I was ‘... trying to share my good feeling, convinced that the sublime object which had liberated me – books and literature – could liberate everyone else too’. Thirty-two thousand dollars for writing? Now that’s easy money

compared to everything else I've done. It feels like a kind of liberation. You get a grant, you're over the moon, you think it's a shit ton of money, you get hit with a tax bill. Then you realise that it actually *wasn't* a shit ton of money – it's barely enough to live on. Back to the drawing board.

Is writing always like this, a fleeting joy akin to that quick shot of alcohol or line of crushed-up amphetamines up my nose? The blazing clarity that is like that orgasmic 'le petit mort': I've spent much of my life chasing it, for it to dull when I think I've found it, and then before I know it it's time to start all over again. The satisfaction I feel when an essay manages to connect with a like-minded person disappears as soon as it is received, and it is just as infrequent as the dazzling feeling of wonder and awe I feel wash over me when I read something that follows me for ages, which I won't attempt to even minutely list because once something this personal is revealed, in this way, the effect is immediately diminished. Who cares what sticks? Writing is about knowing, but also it is about not knowing, of admitting you don't know. The spaces between knowledge that allow for understanding. To open, to return. To find a home (inside yourself). Like a puzzle or a video game, it's a worthwhile pursuit until the very end, until it's time to press replay: just because I've mastered one piece of writing doesn't mean I'll continue to master others; the replay appeal is what's alluring. Game over. Press play to start.

That could be the crux of it – maybe art is not 'work' because work is not 'life'. It *is* work, in that there is a wage relation that assumes an exchange value, resulting in that uniform metric expressed by money – *cold, hard, cash* – but it's

not work, because I don't hate it. How else can you explain the myriad wage disparities otherwise? Here's a word. It'll pay you 50 cents. Here's another. What about 3 cents? Usually no rhyme or reason to it other than how the publication funds itself, and even then, you can write for a well-endowed magazine and only be paid in social capital. There's the prestige that comes with proximity: my work has appeared in *The Humdrum Journal*, so there! What's left unspoken is that I spent two months thinking about it, about fifty hours all up writing it. A month and a half later, \$100 appears in my bank account. That byline might take me to a better place, though. If I write 500 words every day for a year I'll have a book. But will those words be considered art or literature? A creative nonfiction essay mining a bunch of trauma for \$400 (4000 words). A catalogue essay about another artist's work for \$1000 (1000 words). One of the previously-published essays in this book, which contains around 7000 words, earned me \$150. The editing process took months, and was one of the most joyful experiences. My editor's role was voluntary, meaning they were not remunerated for their labour, meaning they worked for free, meaning they were not paid. \$250 for a 4000-word essay I'd spend endless months on, versus \$2000 for a 2000-word essay I'd give zero fucks about – sometimes I need to pay my rent, other times I am in it for the most unadulterated joy, but most of the time I'm looking for that elusive, hopeless fun. If I get paid \$250 and \$1500 for the same kind of job, does it mean I care less about the cheaper one? Some people would refer to it as 'werk' – if you made it sound whimsical then this conundrum might be better tolerated. Reference that Rihanna song. I could possibly consider myself a clown for choosing to display my intellectual growth on a public stage, keeping myself afloat through keeping others stimulated and entertained. It's all work isn't it?

Sophia Giovannitti calls it ‘working in an affect factory’. Early in *Working Girls*, her scintillating book on the similarities between selling art and selling sex – how they’re both symbolic types of labour whose worth then rests on fantastical ideas arising from projection and the imagination – she reminisces about her father, whom she says, to invoke that increasingly antiquated sentiment, refused to sell out, because ‘to sell art would be to sell one’s soul, tainting an object of unadulterated creation, irreparably, with cash’. Instead, he worked on his art after he had knocked off from his day job in construction. He never let anyone see it.

‘But his art also remained touched by capital in every way,’ Giovannitti observes, ‘regardless of its refusal to willingly enter the market: flattened into the only pockets of time he could steal from his relentless schedule; restricted by which materials he could afford; abandoned, at a few low points, in his exhaustion, but always returned to; tended to with verve up and against every obstacle’.

At this I think of the photographer Vivian Maier, whose life’s work was only uncovered after her death. Not that she cared to show it to anyone anyway. What’s ironic is that this work only became visible after she’d defaulted on rent for the storage space where she kept her materials, for them to be auctioned off to art collectors. Like the colonialists who called themselves ‘explorers’, they called themselves ‘curators’.

How does one quantify artistic labour? How do we quantify it such that it is ‘fair’ – as in, commensurate with the amount of time I put in? Does one consider the time spent being kept up till 3am, brain putting together the skeleton of an art work part of this labour? What about when one reads twenty-four different books to arrive at one glimmering idea? I’ve spent hours I am told I ‘shouldn’t’ reading a book alongside a critic I’m editing.

This is not a complaint but an expression of pleasure. I'm most content when I have time to think and time to write. Yet those of equal talent and interest may not even have a chance.

It's a question for the times: art flourishes under capitalism, yet the same art dies. If, in this society, love is private, reproductive and unpaid (art is a labour of love), and work is public, productive and paid (art can never be quantified), I wonder where that leaves art-work. Surely there are more options than just burnout or poverty.

Anwen Crawford maintains something similar in her zine-length essay *Decorum Serves the Rich*, which serves to debunk the common public assumption that many published writers generally 'make a living from book sales'. Within the zine she quotes cash amounts and royalties she has personally received, all of which roughly equal to two months' rent in a major urban city at most, citing that the main issue for writers and readers, '... is that nearly 600 years later, in an age of mass literacy, the idea that writing books is a gentleman's pursuit still structures the publishing industry'. For a long time, it was gauche to mention dollar amounts, and for some people that is still very much the case. Not unlike playing Candy Crush, you'd need a bunch of free coins to start with to even think about getting ahead, which in the context of art-making is simply to continue. Otherwise, short of exchanging your labour elsewhere, you might want to consider if there are other objects to sell. As book critic Christian Lorentzen writes in an essay on the life and work of Philip Roth – that careerist du jour – 'Institutional jockeying, posturing in profiles and Q&As, roving in-person readership cultivation, social-media fan-mongering, coming off as a good literary citizen among one's peers – some balance of these elements is now part of every young author's life.'

It makes sense. A book can cost \$32.99 at the bookstore upon release only for it to be found in the one-dollar bargain bin a few months later. Or it can be resurrected as a cult classic decades after the writer has died, or in some cases, shortly after a writer's demise. For a short period of time while writing this book I thought if I worked x number of hours every day, something productive would happen. I'd write 1000 words a day in the eight hours I allocated myself. The brain is a machine. Punch in, punch out. Go to sleep and stop thinking about it until the next day. Of course I was proven wrong. There were many sentences I could never have crafted, ruminations I would have never come to, if I simply sat at my desk and *wrote*. I had to live, too. I had to think. I had to do nothing. I could have understood this via Paul LaFargue, who exhorted in his 1883 treatise *The Right to Be Lazy*:

Cannot the laborers understand that by overworking themselves they exhaust their own strength and that of their progeny, that they are used up and long before their time come to be incapable of any work at all, that absorbed and brutalised by this single vice they are no longer men but pieces of men, that they kill within themselves all beautiful faculties, to leave nothing alive and flourishing except the furious madness for work.

Art-making contains a routine-less spontaneity that keeps me coming back. Work does not contain an incentive that makes me desire to return. And yet, as Fisher writes, 'full-time employment precludes the engagement in long-form projects'.

In *Do What You Love: And Other Lies About Success and Happiness*, her searing critique of the ‘do what you love’ culture so commonly espoused and aspired to in the age of self-promotion egged on by the impulses and mechanisms that make up social media, Miya Tokumitsu observes that the mentality ‘allows us to valorise elite workers, those who choose to overwork, and ignore those who have to overwork’. This is why the aforementioned \$32000 felt so breezy. It may be that these amounts became mine to possess – in their full glory – immediately, without it being spread across weeks and months, but it’s almost very certainly that it’s a sum of money that gives me this choice to overwork. This is on top of the fact that there’s a need to overwork in an ecosystem that simultaneously brags about equality and diversity while undermining them in the same breath. Under these circumstances it’s no wonder that the blame invariably circles back to the self.

For David Graeber, who in his book of the same name viewed what he called ‘bullshit jobs’ – that is, jobs surrounded by honour and prestige; respected by professionals, well-paid, and treated as high achievers – as ‘dummy jobs that are effectively made up’, these are arenas of ‘hopelessness, depression, and self-loathing’. One can sort middle managers and compliance officers in this category. Quality control inspectors. Someone working ‘social media comms’ at a large mining corporation or a bank. The existence of bullshit jobs simply exists to undergird the necessity of ‘shit jobs’ – that is, ‘jobs that are blue-collar and pay by the hour’ – so feudalism can remake itself. When we think about the gig economy, and how art-making is increasingly joining its ranks, the idea of knowledge work being that of belonging to the upper classes is increasingly becoming defunct. For many decades now, as Maurizio Lazzaratto writes in *Marcel Duchamp and*

the Refusal of Work, ‘... the artist became a model of “human capital” because he embodied the “freedom” to create’. When liberation and the pursuit of capital become mutually exclusive, it’s no wonder that this same ‘freedom’ is succumbing to the neoliberal logic of planned obsolescence. You can be liberated only if you adhere to prescribed ways of being.

Through this logic, upward mobility can be acquired through education and literacy, directly through institutions or otherwise, a space in which you can simultaneously be amongst the precariat and bourgeoisie. In this catastrophic era, art-making sits in that destabilising space between ‘bullshit job’ and ‘shit job’, its subjective nature perpetuating a kind of inane, roundabout subjectivity that demands no answers but yet leaks into all our material lives regardless whether we are buying or selling. All she needed was to continue to make it work. To have enough, so as to be able to keep doing the work. To keep chasing that hopeless fun, where curiosity finds a home.

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